



# Insights into the Lives of Children with Disabilities: Findings from the 2006 National Disability Survey

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## Executive Summary

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## Executive Summary

### Introduction

In line with changes in policy over the last decade (Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004; Disability Act, 2005), research has begun to focus on understanding the profile and experiences of children with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities in Ireland. With an increased policy emphasis on inclusive education internationally (UNESCO, 1994), disability studies have sought to gain greater insights into the profile and characteristics of children and young people with disabilities. While initially the focus was on charting variations in disability prevalence across a range of gender and social groups, more recently attention has shifted to assessing whether there is evidence of over-identification among certain groups and bias in processes of disability and SEN identification (Keslair and McNally, 2009; Banks *et al.*, 2012). Attention has also moved to examining how best to provide for children and young people with disabilities, particularly in the school context. After many years of special and mainstream educational systems for students with SEN, internationally the inclusion agenda increasingly argues for students with SEN to be educated in mainstream settings for as much of the curriculum as possible (Pijl, Meijer and Hegarty, 1997; Meijer, 2003). But crucially research is only now assessing how students actually fare in different settings and what supports are required to maximise their inclusion and engagement. Student experience and outcomes across a range of social, academic and personal domains has now become central to international research on the education of children and young people with SEN and disabilities. In the Irish context, until recently, little was known about children and young people in relation to the nature of their disabilities, their profile and characteristics and their social and academic engagement in school. Improvements in data available have allowed, for the first time, a comparison between the home and school experiences of children and young people with disabilities and their non-disabled peers.

This report builds upon recent research using large-scale population data to provide detailed insights into the lives of children and young people (aged 0 to 17) with disabilities in Ireland. We use the child questionnaire of the *National Disability Survey* (2006) which gathered information about children with disabilities using the nine different disability categories. The report focuses on three main themes: first, the nature of disability and profile of children identified in the *National Disability Survey*; second, the educational supports received by this group of children and young people; and finally, the factors influencing a number of key social and academic outcomes among this group. This report builds on a number of recent publications using population-based data sets such as the *Growing Up in Ireland* study (Williams *et al.*, 2009) and the *National Study of Special Classes* (McCoy *et al.*, 2014) which have provided much needed insight into the home and school lives of this group.

## Key Findings

### Profile of Children with Disabilities

The *2006 National Disability Survey* was the first major survey of people with disabilities in Ireland. Designed as a follow-up survey, it interviewed a sample of those who were classified in *Census 2006* as having a disability. Some 4.1 per cent of children were identified as having a disability in *Census 2006*, a figure that is substantially lower than other recent estimates, such as 17 per cent (NCSE, 2006) and 25 per cent (Banks and McCoy, 2011). These variations arise due to differences in language, terminology, definition and methodology. The latter estimate, for example, drew on multiple informants, parent, teacher and student in deriving a SEN prevalence rate for nine-year-olds. In the *National Disability Survey* the determination for being recognised as having any disability is based on the level of difficulty experienced in everyday activities, with levels of difficulty required to be defined as having a disability varying across the nine disability categories. Many other national data sources have no thresholds for severity of disability, with the result that children with less severe disabilities are likely to be under-estimated in the *National Disability Survey*.

The study examined characteristics of children and young people in the *National Disability Survey* by focusing on their gender, socio-economic background in addition to the type of disability they had. In line with studies in Ireland and internationally (King *et al.*, 2000; Banks and McCoy, 2011; McCoy *et al.*, 2012a) our findings show that boys are 1.7 times more likely than girls to have a disability. In terms of social background characteristics, children and young people with disabilities are more likely to come from disadvantaged and one-parent households compared to the general population. In relation to the type of disability, over three-quarters of respondents reported having intellectual or learning disabilities followed by (i) remembering or concentrating disabilities, (ii) speech disabilities and (iii) Emotional, Psychological and Mental Health (EPMH) disabilities. The group with intellectual or learning disabilities is made up of three distinct groups: children and young people with “difficulty in learning everyday skills such as reading and writing ... due to a condition such as ADHD or dyslexia” (60 per cent), those with “difficulty with interpersonal skills” (21 per cent) and those with “difficulty with intellectual functions” (19 per cent). In sum, the research highlights variations in SEN/disability estimates across different data sources, often arising from different terminology, definitions and methodologies. The results from the *National Disability Survey*, the focus of this research, show a high prevalence of intellectual or learning disabilities among children with disabilities. Three-quarters of children with a disability have either an intellectual or learning disability.

## **Educational Supports for Children with Disabilities**

The *National Disability Survey* Child Questionnaire sought detailed information about the provision and supports for children and young people with disabilities in education. For the first time this report presents findings about the type of school and class placements for students with disabilities and explores the extent to which education placements vary by individual student characteristics. Findings show that the majority of children with disabilities attend mainstream education (72 per cent), a further 13 per cent are in special classes in mainstream schools and 15 per cent attend special schools. Previous research for the general school population, shows that the proportion of *all* children placed in special education (special class or school) in Ireland is less than 5 per cent (Banks and McCoy, 2011; McCoy *et al.*, 2014).

Our findings also show that class placements appear to be influenced by the type of disability: for example, children with speech difficulties are more likely to be placed in special education (schools or classes) than children with other disabilities. For children with intellectual or learning difficulties, those with autistic spectrum disorders or intellectual impairments (e.g., Down syndrome) are far more likely to be placed in special education settings compared to children with learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia, ADHD). Special education placement is also more likely for children from households where the parents are unemployed. Furthermore, our findings suggest that class placement changes somewhat as children move through the education system with students more likely to be placed in special education at post-primary compared to primary level. These findings may reflect differences in the structure and organisation of primary and post-primary sectors (Smyth, McCoy, Darmody, 2004), requiring students moving to post-primary to adapt to a very different setting with multiple teachers, typically a larger school with a longer school day, more formal relationships with school staff, a new and broader curriculum and different teaching methodologies. These changes may prove more difficult for students with disabilities.

In terms of the need for additional resources and supports, this report focused on three main areas: personnel, adjustments to the curriculum and equipment. Overall, the survey shows that, according to their parents, the majority of students with disabilities do not need any of these supports to attend school, follow the curriculum or take exams. Where students do require additional supports, personnel – such as learning support assistants (or tutors) – are most frequently cited as being needed. Approximately, 10 per cent of children with disabilities reported that their needs are not being met in terms of personnel, curriculum adjustment or equipment.

In sum, the study shows that while special education placements are higher for particular disability types, there is also evidence that boys and children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be

placed in special education. Further, in post-primary schooling there are increased numbers of students with disabilities in special education.

## **Educational Experiences and Outcomes**

This study adds to the relatively small research literature on how children and young people with disabilities experience school. The *National Disability Survey* allows for analysis of two key dimensions of student well-being – attendance at school and the nature of social and peer participation. While it has long been known that absenteeism impacts on a range of educational outcomes (McCoy *et al.*, 2007), social participation has more recently emerged as an important influence on school engagement, both directly and indirectly (McCoy and Banks, 2012).

Our findings suggest that children with EPMH, particularly girls, are at greater risk of absenteeism compared to children with other disabilities. Young people with intellectual or learning disabilities seem far less likely to accumulate extensive periods of time absent from school compared to children with other disabilities. A total of 9 per cent of young people with intellectual or learning disabilities accumulate at least 3 months of absence from school, compared to 25 per cent of children with EPMH. In relation to the social dimension of well-being, peer and social relations, the findings highlight important differences among young people with disabilities. Again, young people with EPMH appear at greater risk – being far less likely to engage with their peers. In this case however, young men, rather than young women, with EPMH seem to be at greater risk of being socially isolated. Young people with EPMH are also less likely to participate in sport, and when they do participate, they tend to so much less frequently. While acknowledging limitations in terms of sample size, the results raise some concern over the well-being of children and young people with EPMH, both in terms of their levels of absence from school and in terms of their engagement socially and with peers.

## **Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

In the past, research on children and young people with disabilities and SEN has been limited due mainly to a lack of available data. The *National Disability Survey* is one of a number of important large nationally representative datasets which provide, for the first time, in-depth insights into the home and school lives of this group of children and young people in Ireland. One major advantage of the *National Disability Survey* data on children with disabilities is its completion in the home and, as outlined in Chapter 1, it is often completed by the parents of those with disabilities. This not only assures greater accuracy of the information gathered but removes any doubts about over- or double-reporting which may take place in school settings (Banks and McCoy, 2011). The accuracy of administrative school-based data is often criticised

where prevalence in a school is linked to the resources or supports received (Graham and Sweller, 2011).

As noted earlier, one of the limitations of the study relates to the profile of the sample of respondents, in particular, the severity of need of the children and young people with disabilities. Differences in the language and terminology used by the *National Disability Survey* compared to other administrative and cohort data sets means that the children involved are difficult to compare and research based on different data sources produces different disability prevalence rates. Recent research, drawing on information from multiple informants, shows that between 25 and 28 per cent of children and young people have some form of special educational needs under the broadened definition in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004) (Banks and McCoy, 2011; Cosgrove et al., 2014). In comparison, children with disabilities represent 4.1 per cent of those aged 0 to 17 in the Census of Population 2006 (CSO, 2007c) and 5 per cent of those aged 0 to 15 in Census of Population 2011 (CSO, 2012). The *National Disability Survey* thresholds for different disability categories and differences in language used throughout the questionnaire may identify a different group of children perhaps representing those with more severe difficulties compared to children in other data sets and research studies.

## **Policy Implications**

In line with existing research in this area (Banks and McCoy, 2011; McCoy et al., 2012a; Banks et al., 2012), the findings of the *National Disability Survey* highlight a number of policy issues regarding the profile of children and young people with disabilities. In particular, the results points to considerable heterogeneity within this group, in terms of their characteristics, their educational placement, the supports they require and their social and educational experiences.

## **Nature and Targeting of Supports for Children with Disabilities**

The analysis of the *National Disability Survey* highlights wide differences in the prevalence of disabilities across social groups. The results also showed placement in special education settings varied not only by disability type, but also by gender and social background characteristics. The findings highlight the possibility of dangers of labelling children and young people with disabilities particularly in light of evidence regarding the potential stigmatisation, stereotyping and lowered expectations for the children involved.

## **Achieving Inclusive Education**

Within the context of an inclusive education framework, the findings of this report suggest that special education placement varies systematically by individual child characteristics including gender and social background. These findings question the role of segregated settings (such as special classes or special schools) for some social groups in particular children from families classified as unemployed or economically inactive. Furthermore, the findings highlight significant overlap between certain disabilities, particularly children with intellectual or learning disabilities and those with difficulties remembering and concentrating. This has implications for types of services and supports required and the ways in which supports can be targeted most effectively.

## **Young People with Emotional, Psychological and Mental Health Difficulties**

The results raise questions over the extent to which children and young people experiencing emotional and mental health difficulties receive adequate social and personal support. This research suggests the need for debate around the role of schools, and other key settings, in supporting children and young people with EPMH. Within existing support structures, emotional difficulties can be difficult to distinguish from behavioural difficulties, with emotional and behavioural difficulties typically categorised together. The findings also highlight the potential for greater focus within the curriculum on issues relating to emotional, psychological and mental health particularly during the post-primary years where the greater exam focus may limit the attention this gets.

## **Disability Language, Terminology and Data Collection**

Variations in the measurement of disability prevalence are often the result of differences in language, terminology and definition used by different organisations and government departments. These variations often emerge when comparing data based on different understandings of disability or need. The thresholds for levels of severity used in the *National Disability Survey* are unique and not comparable with other national data sources (many of which have no thresholds for severity of disability). This issue should be examined with a view to adopting more consistent recording and measuring across data sources.

This report highlights the potential of the data in the *National Disability Survey* to be used in conjunction with other recent national data sets to provide new information regarding the lives of children with disabilities. We now have a range of data regarding the age of onset addressed in the *National Disability Survey* in addition to detailed information about the nature and characteristics of children with disabilities in the *Growing Up in Ireland* study on infants and



children. Furthermore, the period of transition between primary and post-primary education is another area of policy concern in relation to children with disabilities. The *National Disability Survey* contains unique information on children at different stages in the school system and could be used in conjunction with the *Growing Up in Ireland* data on 13 year olds to examine student trajectories as they move through the system.









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