CHAPTER 6

(Dis)ability and Choice

The Dilemmas of Young People’s Transitions to Further and Higher Education in Ireland

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Introduction – An Irish Dilemma

There is a perception that few if any protests have taken place in Ireland as a result of the imposed austerity measures adopted by the Irish government under the direction of the Troika. However, on June 19, 2013 one group of citizens representing a variety of disability groups, took to the streets to protest against further announcements by the government that the allocation of resources to children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in mainstream education was to be cut. As a result of the outrage which reverberated across the national airwaves, the decision was temporarily reversed.

The implementation of austerity measures in Ireland is having a significant effect on the ability of children with a variety of different and complex needs to reach their full potential through education. The recent attempt to erode services would have effectively translated into a 10 per cent cut in teaching supports for these young people, bringing the collective reductions over the past three years to 25 per cent (Inclusion Ireland 2013). Austerity has also affected the future recruitment of educational professionals to support these young people. The Irish Times of September 19, 2013 included a cover page story where the plight of Kate Crowley who is in a wheelchair, has spinal rods, severe respiratory conditions and hearing problems yet was unable to be granted access to a special needs assistant to support her learning was noted in the Dail. In tandem with a reduced health service and the lack of educational assessment many are left in educational ‘limbo’ while economic recovery is placed at the top of the political agenda for the Irish government.

This year, 660 young people with an intellectual disability and/or autism will leave formal education and will require support from disability services. However for 153 of these young people, no access to further education, training or day service will be available when classes commence at the end of September (National Parents and Siblings Alliance 2013). This lack of access to

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1 The lower house of the parliament of the Republic of Ireland.
further education and training sits in stark contrast to the record participation rates of young people in Ireland in further and higher education (FE/HE) courses. For example, students engaged in third level education increased from 86,624 in 1994 to 136,719 by 2006 (Flannery and O'Donoghue 2009). By 2009 139,134 were in third level while 103,732 were enrolled on vocational programmes. Participation rates for young people with disability are strikingly different: disabled young people represented nearly five per cent of new entrants to FE/HE in the 2007/2008 academic year (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability 2009, 2010) and, while slight improvements have been observed (up from three per cent in 2005/2006 and less than one per cent in 2008/2009), it is widely acknowledged that young people with disability are underrepresented in Irish higher education (Higher Education Authority 2009). Ireland is not unique in this regard: the representation of young people from this group across FE/HE and within the workplace is low (OECD 2008; UNESCO 2000, 1994; United Nations 2006).

Given the extremely competitive academic routes that currently dominate FE/HE progression in Ireland and the advantages such progression offers in gaining access to the perilous, yet necessary, labour markets through which risk and opportunity are distributed in the context of the 21st Century, the cumulative effect of the reduction in educational resources to support young people with disability in education is significant. In short, it affects their rights to exercise autonomy in relation to the choices they face to progress to acquire the necessary skills to attain the forms inclusion that are highlighted within materialist social models of disability, models to which critical disability studies owes a debt (Goodley 2013; Oliver 1990). In this chapter we draw on research conducted in Ireland which examined the pre and post transition experiences of forty-two students with special education needs (SEN) moving to FE/HE in both rural and urban settings across four geographical areas. The participants presented with a variety of disabilities including attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder; Asperger’s syndrome; dyslexia; mild or moderate general learning difficulties; apraxia; dysgraphia; physical disabilities; hearing impairment; visual impairment; cerebral palsy/epilepsy; speech and language difficulties, and severe and profound learning difficulties. However, for the purposes of this chapter only the pre-transition experiences of the forty-two students (including one parent who was interviewed as a proxy for one student who had severe and profound needs) and the 28 educational professionals who supported them in their schools will be presented. The chapter explores the ambiguous nature of educational ‘choice’ in the transition of Irish young people with disability/SEN through FE/HE and into the risky labour markets of the globalized context.