Addressing Marginalisation within Society — Establishing Inclusive Learning Environments
Michael Shevlin

Widening societal participation for people from marginalised groups has become an established feature of policy frameworks in Ireland and internationally. Irish policies have developed rapidly over the past couple of decades and the initial focus on people from socio-economically disadvantaged groups has been extended to include people with disabilities and/or special educational needs. The majority of pupils with disabilities and/or special educational needs are now educated in mainstream schools whereas in the recent past these pupils were often assigned to special schools. As a result mainstream schools face a number of challenges in establishing inclusive learning environments as mandated in official government policy and increasingly expected within society.

Within the School of Education, the Inclusion in Education and Society research group, which I lead, is based on the central principle of supporting the inclusion of people from marginalised groups in education and society through focused research and examining inclusive theory, policy and practice within education.

**Project IRIS (Inclusive Research in Irish Schools)** — The Inclusion in Education and Society research group, along with colleagues in the University of Northampton and ICEP Europe, conducted a major longitudinal study (Project IRIS) (2010-2015) designed to investigate educational provision for children and young people with disabilities and/or special educational needs within a range of Irish primary, post primary and special schools. The study reported substantial progress in developing learning and social supports within schools and high levels of parental satisfaction with provision. However, significant difficulties remain including inequitable access to assessments of need and inadequate therapeutic supports. This research has helped to shape government policy in relation to developing more inclusive learning environments such as establishing more equitable resource provision in Irish schools.

**Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID)** — Traditionally people with intellectual disabilities (ID) have been among the most marginalised groups within society, perceived as dependent, passive and unable to make a meaningful contribution to their communities. Educational expectations for children and young people with intellectual disabilities have usually been influenced by deficit based models. I along with colleagues in the School of Education established The Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID) in 2014 (following on from the National Institute for Intellectual Disability and the Certificate in Contemporary Living) within the Inclusion in Education and Society research group, with the explicit aim of developing an inclusive learning environment within higher education and enabling young people with intellectual disabilities to forge independent lives and gain meaningful employment. An Arts, Science and Inclusive Applied Practice (ASIAP) programme has been developed at Level 5 Certificate (major award) on the National Qualifications Framework. This is designed to enable participants to develop their learning skills and make a successful progression into employment or to avail of further educational opportunities. A network of business partners has been established who provide work placements through a mentoring programme and a number of previous graduates from the Certificate in Contemporary Living programme have attained employment contracts. As Mei Lin Yap, one of those graduates, observes: ‘When I dream big I need others to dream big with me’.

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Michael Shevlin received his BA degree from NUI Maynooth and his PhD from Trinity College Dublin. He joined Trinity College in 1996, having worked as a post-primary teacher. He served as Head of School and is Chair of AHEAD an organisation dedicated to improve access to further and higher education and employment for people with disabilities within Irish society. He has been published widely and is engaged in research on transitions to postsecondary education for young people with disabilities.

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→ “When I dream big I need others to dream big with me.”