Oireachtas statement

Introduction

My name is Patricia McCarthy, I am a research associate in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. As a vision impaired academic this is an area that I have researched in the past and am currently undertaking further research around the educational experiences of blind/vision impaired children and young people. There has been a history of exclusion and missed opportunities among blind/vision impaired people within education and employment. Research indicates a positive correlation between education and employment.

While blind/vision impaired young people have been included in the mainstream education setting for quite some time, the challenge is to change the system to meet their needs. There has been a paucity of research involving blind/vision impaired people as primary participants conducted in Ireland. This has resulted in research which does not represent the true experiences of this section of the population highlighting the need for further research.

While my previous research was conducted over a decade ago, I believe that many of the findings are still pertinent today. I am briefly going to discuss some of these and indicate where possible, areas where improvements can be made.

Access to the school curriculum

Changes to the curriculum, greater access to technology, greater availability of exam accommodations, greater access to learning supports and more diverse teaching and learning methodologies mean that a wider range of subjects are now available to blind/vision impaired children and young people. However, access barriers were experienced in relation to aspects of the curricula at all levels of the education system. Access to the Mathematics curriculum presented difficulties for many participants in this research. This is significant as Maths is recognised as a required subject for many Third Level opportunities. Many factors contributed to participants' inability to effectively access the Maths curriculum including ineffective teaching methodologies, inappropriate and insufficient provision of Maths books and materials in accessible formats, insufficient teacher training, insufficient

appropriate supports and inappropriate attitudes around ability and expectations. Other areas of the curriculum where challenges occurred included whether or not people took Irish again while having an exemption from Irish is necessary for some it should not be the default position as again it restricts post-school opportunities. Access to PE was also an area where some experienced challenges and we all know the importance of exercise for our physical and mental health.

Access to technology

Advances in technology in recent years has positively impacted on the educational experiences of blind/vision impaired young people. There needs to be policy initiatives in place that ensures that all blind/vision impaired children and young people at primary and post-primary education become acquainted with, familiar with and competent in the use of both mainstream and assistive technologies. This needs to start from an early age as there is a recognition that at the post-primary stage of education the level of sophistication required in terms of assistive technology skills is much higher given the demands of the curriculum. To ensure that this happens funding needs to be put in place, teachers need additional training and there needs to be consistent input from support services to ensure that all blind/vision impaired young people have access to the technologies available as well as the necessary IT training to acquire the necessary skills. There is also a need to ensure that those requiring/desiring to learn through the medium of Braille have these needs met in an appropriate manner, this is an important component of access to technology.

Access to support

Blind/vision impaired people are not a homogeneous group therefore it is essential, that the diversity of their needs be recognised. It is also necessary to understand that the needs of blind/vision impaired people can change over time and can differ depending on situation and location. Flexibility of access to supports is essential. It is necessary to ensure that the supports availed of, are designed to meet the needs of individuals. Accommodations and supports are necessary particularly within a mainstream educational system that has been designed around the learning needs of those with full sight. Integral to these supports is access to a quality expanded core curriculum. This would enable young blind/vision

impaired people to acquire such skills as orientation skills, mobility skills, technology skills, braille skills (where appropriate) and general life skills. These need to be provided in a timely manner, in an age appropriate way by those with relevant knowledge and skills and in a manner that ensures that the young people feel that they are being empowered without making them feel negatively different from their able-bodied peers.

Findings in this research indicated that the presence of an SNA impacted on social interaction and a consequence of this was that friendships with peers diminished. This was particularly apparent during secondary education at a time when young people are trying to gain independence from, and over-reliance on adults. There is often a disparity between what vision impaired/blind people required of SNAs and what they were perceived to be employed to do. This is pertinent as the role of the SNA is perceived of in a care role rather than a learning support role which is generally what blind/vision impaired children and young people require most.

Findings in my research showed that blind/vision impaired people are still frequently absent from any meaningful aspect of the decision-making process regarding the planning and delivery of the services they require including those provided by disability providers. This diminishes independence and reinforces dependence. These issues were evident at all stages of people's lives and were particularly relevant during various transition phases when people often had to engage with service providers on their own behalf for the first time. The purpose of supports should be to enhance rather than diminish the individuals' independence and to enable rather than disable inclusion. Therefore, there is a need to establish policies and practices around provision of supports that are proactive rather than reactive and promote the active involvement of blind/vision impaired people at all levels of the process.

Transitions

Greater transition opportunities are now available to this section of the population due to a variety of changes including within policy and practice. However, it was also apparent that

transition choices and opportunities can be thwarted through disabling environments and disabling attitudes.

It is apparent from AHEAD data that blind/vision impaired young people are consistently underrepresented in higher education and the numbers have actually declined in recent years. Decisions taken at secondary school can have repercussions in relation to post-school choices and opportunities. Exemptions from Irish, exemptions from Maths, Maths taken at foundation level and students doing the Leaving Certificate Applied programme were some of the decisions experienced by participants in this research. All of these can restrict post-school choices and opportunities in terms of higher education and employment.

Findings in this research indicated that those that provided career advice within mainstream settings often lacked adequate knowledge to offer constructive career advice to blind/vision impaired people. This study also indicates that the advice offered by those providing career guidance was often narrow in respect of the types of employment opportunities available to blind/vision impaired people.

Expectations can be thwarted by societal attitudes towards disability. However, evidence of resilience determination and agency were demonstrated by a significant number of participants. These were significant factors in enabling participants to manage learning environments and achieve life course opportunities even when faced with significant challenges including systemic, institutional and attitudinal barriers. The need to prove one's ability within disabling environments where one's ability to participate is determined by societal perceptions of disability was evident and often necessitated challenging disabling environments and disabling attitudes to ensure participation and inclusion.