

Inequality and Inclusion in Education: Are we making progress?

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EFFECT

*Enhancing Efficiency and
Effectiveness in Education*

Backdrop

- Schools are at the forefront of key societal changes and challenges
- Increasingly sites of contestation over deep social questions
- Dealing with the enduring impact of the pandemic
- How are students experiencing school life in today's Ireland?
- How can *all* students be best prepared for living in the 2030s and beyond?

Overview

1. How are students experiencing school life?
2. Do they have a meaningful voice?
3. Single-sex Vs mixed gender schools
4. Creating inclusive & supportive environments
5. Transitions for disabled students
6. Priorities for the future

Major Study (2024)

How do secondary students experience school life?

Centred on voices of teenagers across 21 distinct school contexts

Engagement at school, autonomy and agency, relationships, learning, social and personal development

Key evidence on:

- Impact of school and family resources
- Role of school ethos and climate in shaping experiences
- Experiences of school gender mix
- Teaching and learning in the digital age
- Enduring impact of COVID-19
- Wellbeing and life satisfaction

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'EMBRACING DIVERSITY IN ALL ITS FORMS': THE VOLUNTARY SECONDARY SECTOR IN IRISH EDUCATION

EAMONN CARROLL, SELINA MCCOY AND KEYU YE



Major Study (2025)

Post-school pathways of students from special and mainstream schools

Centred on voices of young adults

Preparedness for leaving school, skills development and supports, planned and realised post-school pathways, experiences of transition, outlook for the future

Key evidence on:

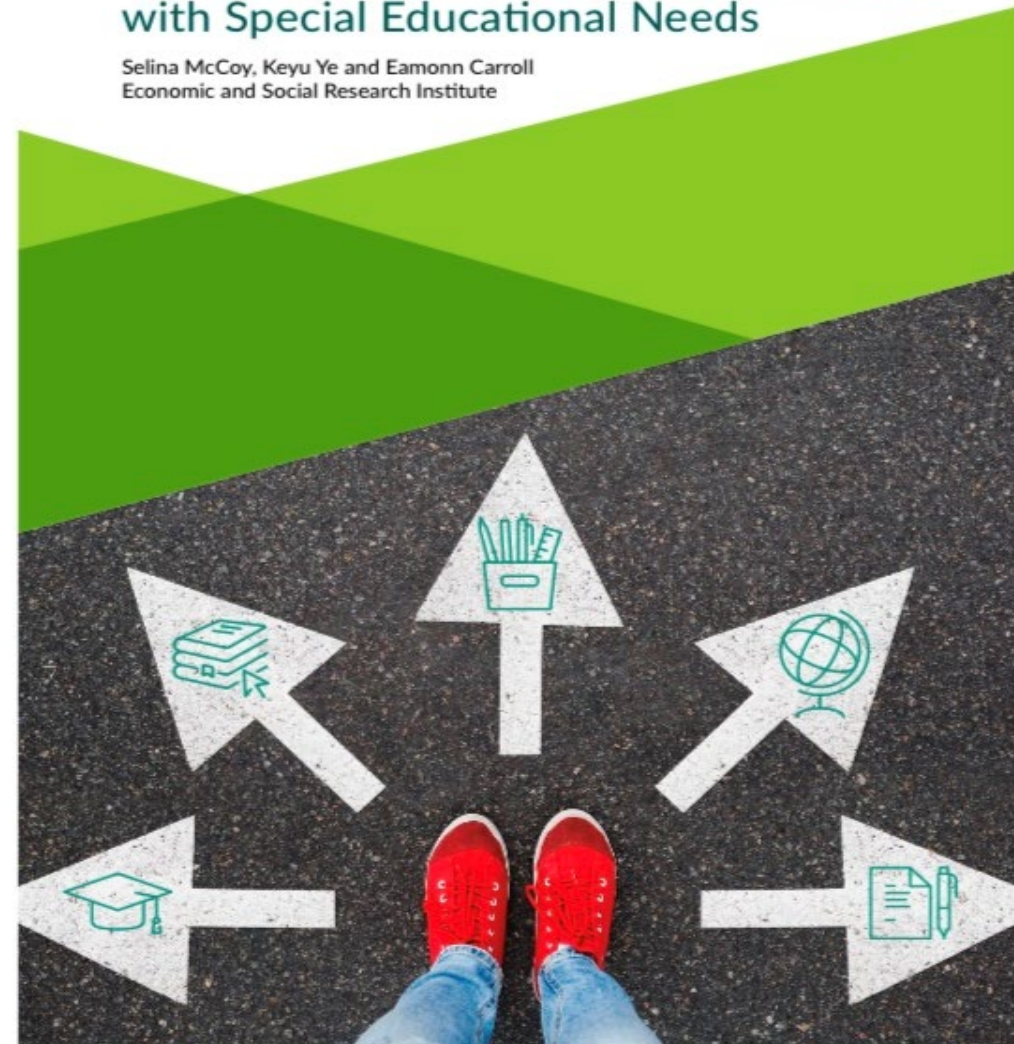
- Gaps between school & post-school systems
- Adequacy of supports
- Resourcing of non-mainstream education/training programmes
- Pathways through education/progression opportunities



An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
um Oideachas Speisialta
National Council
for Special Education

Paths, Tracks, Gaps and Cliffs: The Post-School Transitions of Students with Special Educational Needs

Selina McCoy, Keyu Ye and Eamonn Carroll
Economic and Social Research Institute



How are students experiencing school?

- Majority are engaged, but many are neutral (socially structured)
- Students most positive about science subjects, least about Irish
- CBAs not experienced as intended, gap between JC & SC
- ↑ Attendance difficulties (↑ where they struggled to engage C19)
- Resource constraints = challenges in supporting student wellbeing. Only 46% - school provides adequate wellbeing supports, with disabled students faring less well.
- Urgent need for professional, therapeutic supports for children and young adults, supports which follow them as they move through and beyond the educational system

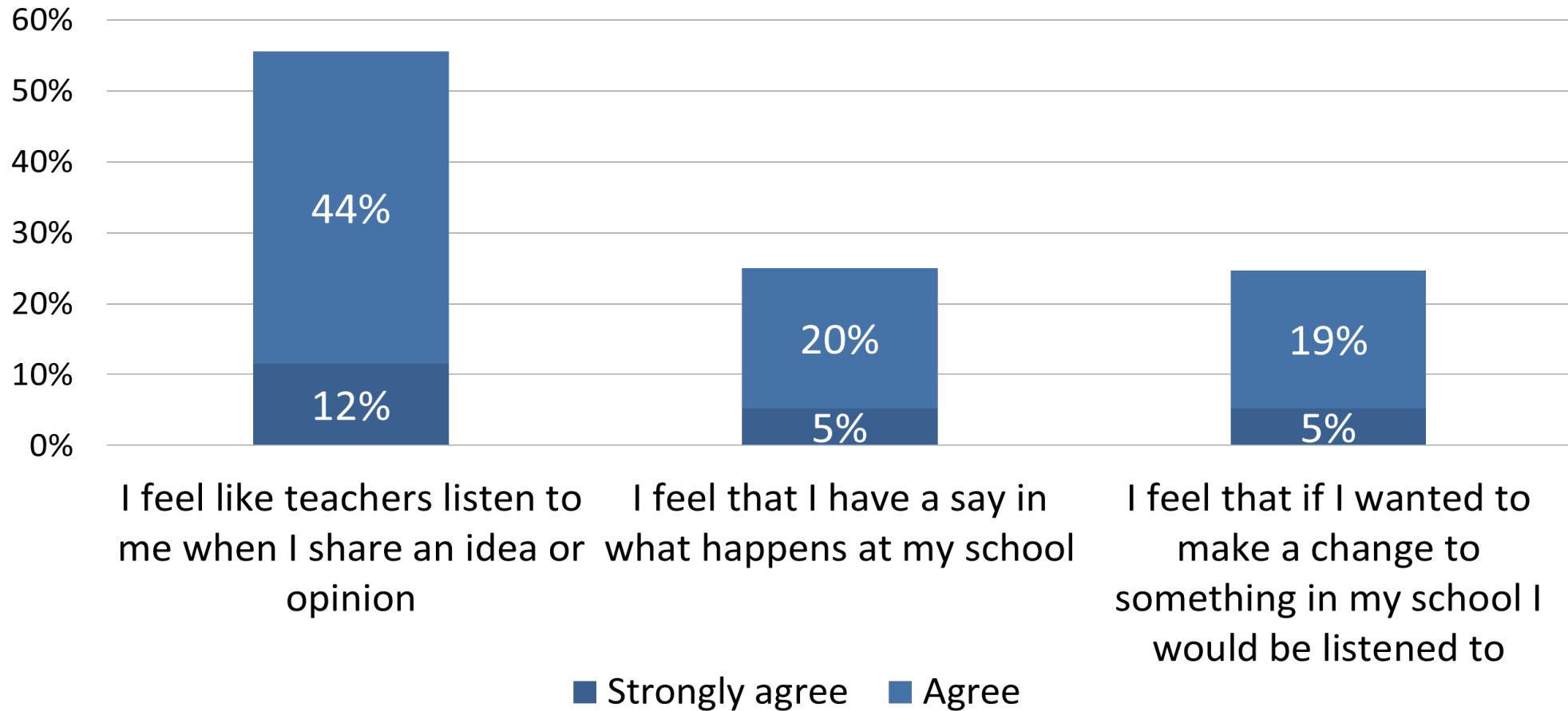
How are students experiencing school?

- Reading, participation in sports and cultural activities increasingly socially structured and gendered
- Concerted cultivation activities have a shelf life - are discontinued by many in year(s) leading up to the LC
- Variation in terms of school size and school gender mix
- Continued efforts by schools (& facilities like libraries) key in trying to reverse decline in reading for pleasure
- Strong case for subsidised provision of sports and cultural activities for more disadvantaged groups
- Questions over the sustainability of a system reliant on volunteerism to provide extra-curricular programmes

Do students have a meaningful voice?

- Vast majority feel teachers listen to them and encourage them to express opinions; lower for students with AEN
- Critical of role in decision-making at school:
 - More positive in DEIS & ETB schools (Skerritt et al., 2021)
 - Students with AEN less positive
 - Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-making Action Plan 2024-2028

Student voice



Do they have a meaningful voice?

- School staff positive

The board hear what student council are doing, students feel affirmed ... students are not cowed by going to [a] board of management member meeting, the board is probably more nervous of them! (Principal, non-DEIS school)

- But students note limited role

If you bring up a problem in the student council they'll be like, 'oh yeah, we'll look into it', but they never really do ... I don't think the surveys are ever really taken into account. We've done a million surveys ... then just never heard of again. Nothing changed. (5th year focus group, fee-charging school)

- Seek timely and transparent communication

They should give us the reasons why they're saying 'No' ... We are kind of senior people in the school as well, and we don't want to just [follow] things for the sake of it. We should be involved a lot more. (Fifth year focus group, non-DEIS school)

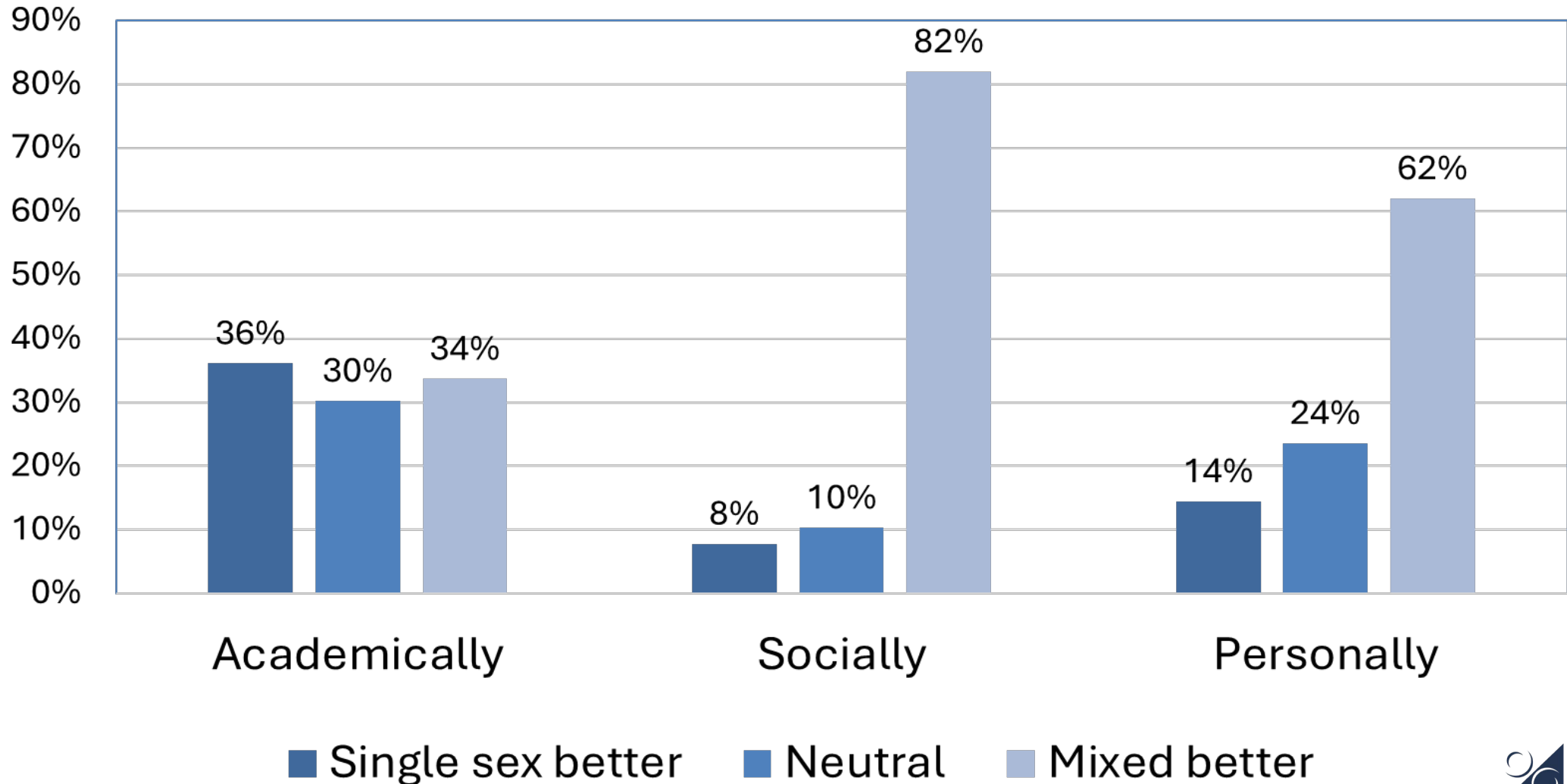
Single sex Vs Coeducational schools

- Increasing % attending coed schools, but change is slow
- Students, regardless of attending single-sex or coeducational schools, favoured coed settings, while preferences varied among staff & parents
- Although some students believed their school's gender mix supported their learning and preparedness for the future, < 20% in single-sex schools preferred their school's gender mix, compared to 90% in coed schools

Reasons for preference



Single sex or coed better?



Where do we go from here?

- The scale of the preference students expressed for coeducation was a surprise
 - what other surprises might an open conversation across the whole school community prompt?
- Important to recognise many students very happy *in* their single-sex schools, if not *about* them being single-sex
- Many teachers and other school staff felt their school gender mix was optimum for learning and preparation for the future across both single-sex & coed schools
- No clear academic performance effects, but some evidence of protective effects for boys' wellbeing and engagement in single sex schools and sports participation, for girls and boys in single sex schools

Where do we go from here?

- Illustrative example of need for conversation:

I think it's wrong, this lobby that tries to say "it's unnatural and it's inhumane and it's all these things". No it's not. If a parent and a child make this decision it has to be respected. I don't think anybody can railroad something through. There's no appetite for it here, I'm not hearing students saying to me that they want to be in a mixed school, I'm not hearing parents saying it to me. (Principal, All Girls' School).

In the survey responses from that principal's school, 86 students stated that they would prefer to be coeducational, 20 were neutral & just 13 stated a preference for single sex. Only 1 strongly preferred single sex where 38 strongly preferred coeducational.

Creating inclusive environments

- Impact of DEIS programme: strong results tackling achievement, attendance & engagement gaps
- ERC: persistent impacts of socio-economic disadvantage – largely through student absenteeism & poor attention (Nelis et al., 2021)
- GUI: School social mix is associated with level of, and growth in, externalising behaviour
- DEIS: Emphasis on literacy skills, student voice, positive interaction with teachers, appreciation of art and culture, participation in sports (particularly girls)
- Schools with DEIS-level need without DEIS resources
- Complexity of need some schools – DEIS+

Creating inclusive environments

- Growth in disability prevalence (Autism). Largest groups physical impairment and difficulties learning, remembering or concentrating
- Wide diversity: Across sample DEIS schools 8.5% to 40% with SEN
- Despite stated policy aspirations, 'multi-track' approach to provision
- Age 13 disabled YP have more conflictual relationships with parents, smaller peer networks, greater difficulties interacting with peers, less involvement in organised sports & more negative attitudes to school
- Transition difficulties (specific learning & general learning disabilities)
- Twice as likely to report enduring impact of COVID-19 on learning
- Attendance, engagement & achievement during primary/early sec years, as well as of parental expectations, key in later outcomes

In-School Supports

- “Good” Supports:
 - Proactive rather than reactive
 - Student-centred rather than prescriptive
 - Individualised rather than group
 - In particular, responsive to specific needs
- “Bad” Supports:
 - Reliant on formal diagnosis, which in some cases was not available or very late in coming
 - Emphasised or even created difference from peers rather than fostering inclusion
 - Could not be accessed without “a fight”

Creating inclusive environments

- Students with socio-emotional difficulties less likely to progress to college, all else being equal
- DARE applications much greater among more highly educated families
- Role of disability in expectations; just 1/3 of students feel expectations consistent with teachers Impact on self-concept and decision-making
- Disproportionate representation of disabled students in DEIS schools and in economically vulnerable households
 - Significance of these factors in students' school and post-school pathways

Creating inclusive environments

- Considerable diversity in preferences for guidance
- Effective support is personalised, student-led and supportive rather than prescriptive, encouraging recipients to decide for themselves while helping them along the way
- Positive reflections on HSE process for assessing needs and interests
- Decision-making that is constrained or shaped by context

Transitions for disabled young people

- Shared school trajectories, divergence after school
- Disabled YP reflect less well on how well school prepares them for adult life, independent living and career decisions
- Self-determination skills key
- Disjunction between Dept Education and HSE in post-school provision

Transitions for disabled young people

- Positive experiences in across a range of non-mainstream pathways – adult day services, National Learning Network etc.
- Delayed and disrupted transitions
- Transport gaps
- Flexible options and progression opportunities
- Early experiences have implications for outlook

Student Wellbeing & Life Satisfaction

- 2024 Study: 85% of PP students rate physical health good to excellent, but 60% for mental health
- Poorer mental health & life satisfaction for students with AEN, economically vulnerable and girls
- GUI: Girls more than twice as likely as boys to be in the 'lower self-esteem' group; boys in 'higher self-esteem' group (11% Vs 6% of girls)
- Wellbeing strongly associated with student belonging and autonomy & these links are stronger among low socio-economic status students. Belonging and autonomy account for a significant proportion of the gap in wellbeing among students with special educational needs

Wellbeing Supports

- Just under 1/2 feel school provides adequate wellbeing support
- Concerns over the adequacy of CPD to deliver wellbeing programmes

A wellbeing programme is great but the teacher doing it is a history teacher or a maths teacher and this is sellotaped on – brilliant in concept but reality is that delivering a really meaningful programme is actually quite challenging. The reality for teachers is they have deadlines to meet in their subject and that's obviously going to be their focus. They didn't set out to be wellbeing teachers. (Principal, fee charging school)

- Wider specialist supports, as well as accessing assessments

It's a holding process right now in schools. And the teachers don't have the skills to hold. There is no general adolescent counselling, it's really really bad. There's nothing ... for anyone. (Guidance counsellor, non-DEIS school)

Priorities for the future

How can *all* students be best prepared for living and working in the 2030s and beyond?

- The need for conversation, student-centred evidence
- Initiatives like the DEIS scheme and wellbeing supports recognise and attempt to address complexity of need through providing key multidisciplinary supports in the school
- Better supporting schools meeting greater social and educational needs
- School infrastructural deficits and teacher supply problems impacting the capacity of schools to offer a diversity of curricular and extracurricular activities – vital in school belonging

Priorities for the future

- Students with AEN value individual support, growth of special classes?
- Need for better preparation for adult life, independent living, career decisions (self-determination skills)
- Open days in non-mainstream post-school settings, mentoring programmes & work experience essential in informed choices
- (Continuity of) supports post-school, particularly transport & therapies
- Resourcing & staffing of adult day services; workforce plan
- Progression opportunities within and across mainstream and non-mainstream settings

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