

Media Coverage of Education Issues for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

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Tomás Murphy
Margaret Turley
Chris Byrne
with
Harry Browne

T OLLSCOIL TEICNEOLAÍOCHTA
BHAILE ÁTHA CLIATH
DUBLIN
TECHNOLOGICAL
UNIVERSITY DUBLIN

Easy to read summary



This report is a summary of research about how Irish newspapers, websites and TV talk about education for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

This research was carried out by three people with disabilities with support from TU Dublin.



Ten people were interviewed by Zoom. They were people with disabilities, family members, journalists and experts.

We asked for their opinions about the media. We also asked about how people with disabilities could speak for themselves in the media.

We also looked at 251 articles in Irish newspapers to find out what stories journalists told and who they spoke to.



What we learned

Most people we interviewed believe telling stories about children and adults with disabilities in education can help make things better for them.

Most people we interviewed believe it is important for people with disabilities to speak for themselves.

Most stories in newspapers did not include the words of people with disabilities.

Stories about education for people with disabilities mention autism more than other conditions.

Stories about education for people with disabilities also mention special schools and special classes much more than they mention integration.



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Introduction to research

In January 2021 we had a Zoom call to see how we were all doing after the last project that we did, which was called 'The Experiences of Adults with Intellectual Disabilities in Ireland During the Covid-19 Crisis'.

We decided to research what the media say about education for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

After that decision, we had to come up with research questions for the new project. Who speaks in the media about these issues? What is the focus of the coverage? How could it improve?

We decided we would try to answer the questions by doing interviews and looking at newspaper archives. We would interview people with disabilities, family members, journalists, and experts. And we decided we would focus on the importance of people with disabilities speaking for themselves.

In our interviews and when we looked at the archives, we tried to see if people were speaking for themselves, and what our interviewees thought about that.

We also tried to see who else was talking about education for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities – teachers, politicians, officials, experts, Special Needs Assistants or family members.

We also decided it was important to find out what kind of education for people with disabilities gets covered in the media.

In 2019 the National Council for Special Education said that Ireland might be violating the UN Charter on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by not doing enough to provide inclusive education.

The National Council for Special Education said it had 'not found any substantial evidence that students with additional needs have better outcomes in special schools/classes'.

We wondered if media coverage was mostly about special schools and 'units'. And if this was the case, we hoped our interviews, especially with journalists, might tell us why.

We made Easy to Read information and consent forms for our interviews, and we worked on asking slightly different questions to different kinds of people.

We planned to ask people for their opinions about the media, and when we interviewed journalists, we would also ask them about why and how they do stories about disability in education.

While we waited for ethics approval from TU Dublin, we practised interviewing each other on Zoom. To help our ethics application, we decided the interviews would be anonymous.

All three of us did all the interviews, with ten people, over the last few months. Harry recorded the interviews, and we watched them back to see what was important.

To research the media archives, we collected articles online from different newspaper websites and sent them to the group. We used the Lexis Nexis database to find more stories, using search terms such as 'disability', 'school', 'special needs' and 'education'.

All together we found 251 articles in four Irish newspapers between 2017 and early this year that were mainly or completely about education for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Many of the articles were about Covid and schools reopening.

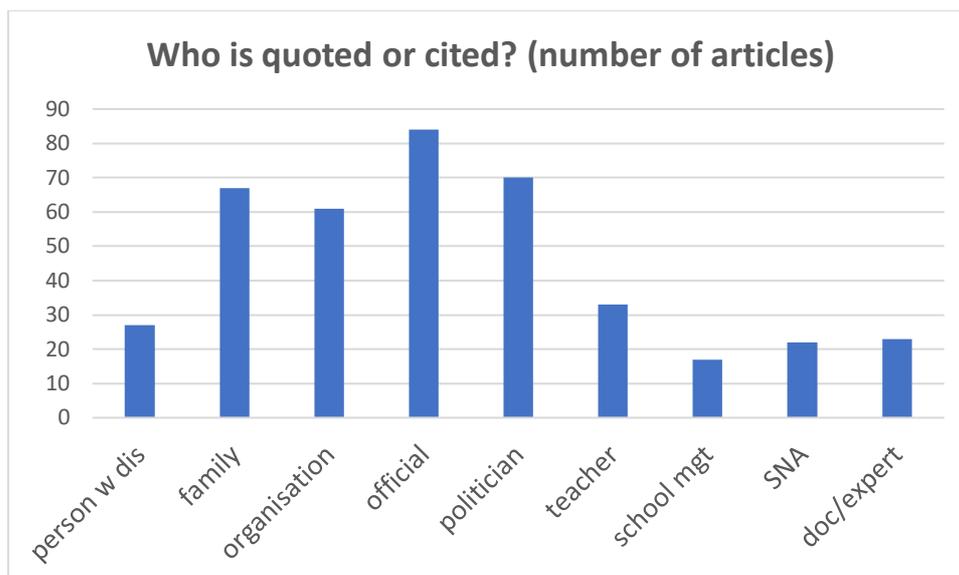
The newspapers were the Irish Times, which had the most articles (97), as well as the Irish Independent, the Irish Examiner and the Irish Daily Mail. Most of the articles were news and feature stories, while 23 of them were opinion articles.

There are probably some articles about education for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities that we didn't find in our searches, but we think we have a good sample and different articles would not have changed our results very much.

Results of content analysis

These are some of the findings from the 251 newspaper articles studied.

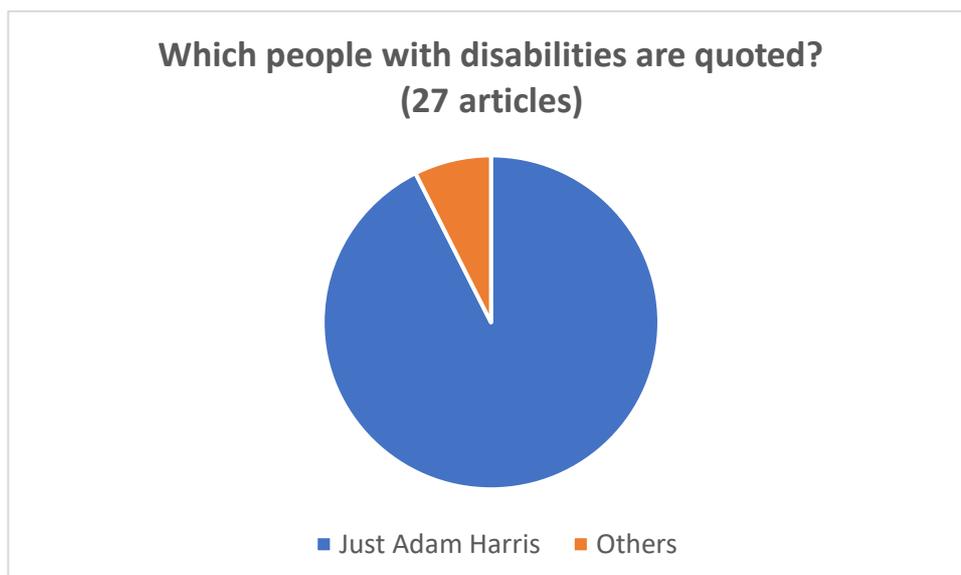
Who speaks about disability issues?



Many articles had more than one kind of person quoted. The kind of people who were quoted most often were officials who spoke for government departments or state agencies, in more than 80 articles.

Politicians, including ministers, were next, quoted in 70 articles. This was followed by family members, usually mothers of children or adults with disabilities. The 'family members' category includes organisations for families such as the Family Carers Association, who were also counted as 'organisation'. Very often in the period we studied, family members were interviewed about the need to reopen schools after the pandemic closures.

There were 27 articles in the study about which we were able to be certain that they were quoting people with intellectual or developmental disabilities. It is possible there may be others but we have no reason to think we missed people in this category.



The well-known public figure Adam Harris of AsIAM, the national autism charity, was the main person with a disability who gave his views to the newspapers in these stories. In most articles, he was not identified as a person with autism, but as a spokesperson for AsIAM.

In 25 of the 27 articles in our research that quoted someone with a disability, Adam Harris was the only person with a disability quoted. In one article he was quoted along with Margaret Turley, one of the authors of this research, who was identified in the newspaper as a spokesperson for Inclusion Ireland.

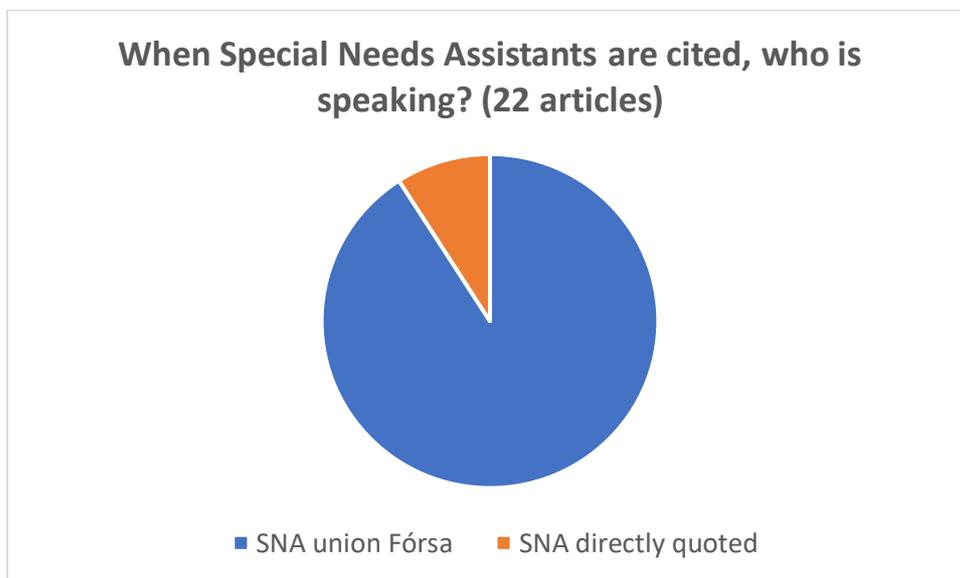
their children's human rights, said [Gerry Fallon](#). He said his daughter, [Orla Fallon](#) (17), who has Down syndrome, "loves" school.

"I like my friends and the teachers help me." Asked if she is looking forward to her Leaving Cert, she smiled: "No, I hate it, but I need it for a job or college."

[James Nolan](#) (17), who is visually impaired and has cerebral palsy, epilepsy and hydrocephalus, also enjoys school. "You see friendly faces and they are helpful from the first minute you walk in the front door until the end of the day.

EXCERPT FROM WEBSITE OF THE IRISH TIMES, 15 APRIL 2021, THE ONLY ARTICLE IN THE RESEARCH THAT QUOTED PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES ABOUT THEIR OWN VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES

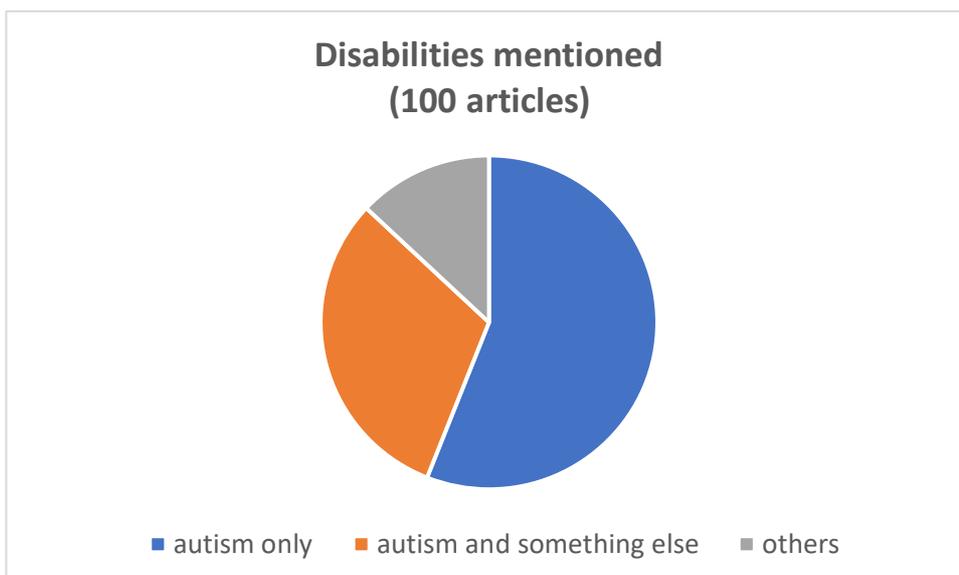
There was only one article out of the 251 in the study, by Kitty Holland in the Irish Times, that quoted people with disabilities who were asked directly about their experience of an education situation.



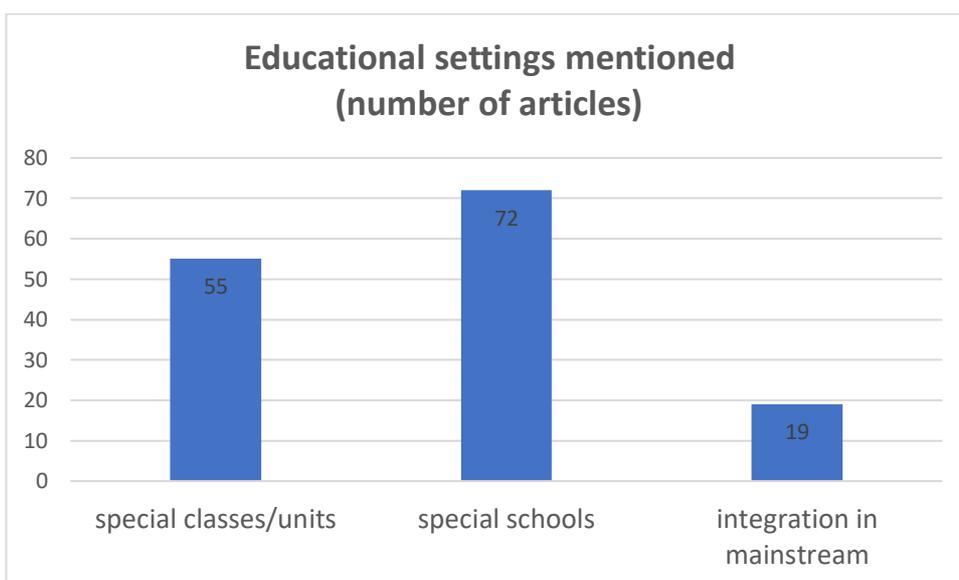
Special Needs Assistants might be regarded as very well placed to comment about the education of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Of the 22 articles that put forward the views of Special Needs Assistants, 20 of them quoted only a spokesperson for their union, FÓrsa – almost all about Covid reopening. One of the times that individual SNAs were quoted, it was also on that topic, disagreeing with their union’s view. It was similar with teachers, whose views were mainly represented by their unions.

What do stories look at?

There were 100 articles that mentioned particular intellectual and developmental disabilities. Of those, there were 56 that mentioned autism (or ASD) on its own, and another 31 that mentioned it with another disability.



What education settings are mentioned?



In the articles that mentioned or discussed specific settings for education for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, it was most common to mention special schools, in 72 articles.

Special classes in mainstream schools, or 'units', were mentioned in 55 articles.

Integration was mentioned explicitly in 19 articles out of the 251 articles studied. We know that special classes or spaces within

mainstream schools can be part of integrated schooling, but very few articles mentioned this.

Is inclusive education highlighted?

We looked more closely at the 19 articles that mentioned or discussed integrated or inclusive education for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Is Ireland ready for a ‘total inclusion’ approach for special education?

Controversial plans could see end of special classes in favour of all children being placed in mainstream

© Tue, Dec 17, 2019, 00:00



EXCERPT FROM WEBSITE OF THE IRISH TIMES, 17 DECEMBER 2019

We found that five of those articles (including four in the Irish Times) were mostly sceptical of ‘total inclusion’. These articles said inclusion is ‘controversial’ and stressed the importance of the provision of special classes and schools.

Only one article in the study (published in the Irish Independent) mostly highlighted support for inclusion. It was mainly based on a statement from Down Syndrome Ireland.

Results of interviews

In our interviews, we tried to understand more about some of these issues by asking different people about them. This section will mainly feature quotes from those interviews, including from journalists, family members of people with disabilities and others.

The focus on 'special' places

Journalists had interesting explanations about why 'special' places receive so much attention.

There is a lot of focus on the special units in schools because recently the Department has been more or less forcing schools to open special classes. We get press releases saying 'Twenty schools in the Dublin area are opening special units for autism next September.'

Then schools are often unhappy because they say 'we don't have the facilities' or 'we don't have the space'.

The focus on special units is because there is a bit of a struggle.

Journalist

You do see it a lot on social media too.

Parents might be told their child needs special class – and that's an easy story to tell. It's almost a physical solution: you need a special unit in the school and that will solve the problem.

For another parent to be told you need a special-needs assistant, some resource-teacher support and maybe some speech and language therapy, that's more of a complicated story to tell.

A more simple story to tell is part of the reason that demand for special classes gets more coverage.

Journalist

From age 4 to 17 everyone tried to put [my son] in a special unit, but he benefited from being in a class with all types of people. The world is not autistic.

Family member

Telling our own stories

The journalists we interviewed did not cite concerns about the vulnerability and protection of people with disabilities as a reason

for not talking with them. However, some other researchers did suggests it's an issue.

Where the pressure is always on and you're telling stories really, really quickly and as fast as you can, any barrier that's in the way will make it less likely to hear the voices of people with disabilities.

Journalist

Staff, teachers, parents... they feel protective of people with disabilities and think they have to look after them, and they have to mind them. So they act as gatekeepers – they don't let outsiders in to speak to them. They may think something bad is going to come out about them.

Researcher

The idea of vulnerability is very much a double edged sword for people with intellectual disabilities. There's so much conflation of people with intellectual disabilities and being vulnerable.

Researcher

I interview people with disabilities all the time and don't draw attention to it. I interview children in schools and I know from talking to the child that he has autism – but I'm not going to go, 'This is John, he has autism', because maybe I'm asking the child about their first day at school.

Journalist

Negativity

It is a long-established fact that journalism tends to highlight conflict and crisis. Journalism and other media forms may also treat disability with sentimentality.

I'd love more positive stories, rather than when there's a crisis that everybody jumps on it and there's a big bang, then it's forgotten about again and nothing really improves.

Constantly the same cycle: Crisis! Big hullabaloo! And then, silence. Crisis! Sometimes I have to block it, because some of it gets really disturbing.

Family member

They don't always tell the real story – they're more looking to play on people's emotions. They're trying to get an angle on it that they know they can hook people in.

I would rather their stories just be a story the same as anyone else – not to look at people with disabilities and go 'Oh poor them'.

Researcher

You notice people with intellectual disabilities used in a way that's more sentimental. Say it's a house makeover programme, and they have a kid with an intellectual disability – as this extra tragedy and why they're so deserving of happiness. You play twinkly music in the background.

Researcher

If there is a risk to it, the risk is that we portray people as being helpless, as being victims. Where you're showing that actually with the right interventions, you can make a huge difference to an individual's life – if you write about it that way, I think it really helps.

Journalist

If the stories are negative, it's probably because that's the reality.

Family member

The benefits of coverage

There was wide agreement in the interviews that media coverage of education issues for people with disabilities can have a positive influence, especially on politicians.

I do think the media and journalists have great power to help with change, power to improve the lives of people who don't have a voice.

Family member

There's an awful lot that isn't being done and that isn't highlighted by journalists, because they don't know about it.

Family member

Some media portrayals have been positive and they've opened up role models.

Researcher

Schools tend to come to the media when they can't get a solution through the normal channels. I have seen many, many cases where publicising a story suddenly effects change. Politicians are very aware of how they are seen in the media.

Journalist

Real inclusion

Interviewees said that a more representative and visible inclusion of people with disabilities in the media was worth doing for a great many reasons.

I wish there was more humane stories, more stories about people's experiences and their disabilities.

Family member

We had a young woman who was having difficulties because of the pandemic because of not being in school. She was in a wheelchair and had a very profound speech impediment, she wasn't really verbal. But she could express herself, and we made a point of asking her how she felt about her school. She did express great happiness at the idea of school – not using words but in her whole body. Unfortunately [in a broadcast] somebody cut her out.

Journalist

There's a tendency in media to include people that are the most stable, the most articulate, the most charming... The more profound difference from the norm is part of disability as well. We shouldn't be making inclusion based on assimilation. We should include people who are very different.

Researcher

There are really good examples of young people with disabilities doing amazing things in education that maybe people would never expect them to do. I think people would be shocked by the positivity and enthusiasm of young people with disabilities when they're actively involved in meaningful education.

Researcher

I don't think journalists interview enough people with disabilities. I don't know if there's not enough understanding there. It helps when we highlight the success stories and how people can meet their full potential – I do think there's positives in that, absolutely.

Family member

Conclusion and recommendations

It is disappointing but not surprising that busy journalists in Irish media do not often make the effort to talk to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. It is good that there is a spokesman for a national organisation who has autism and is easily contacted and quoted by the media. But it would be better to hear more and different voices.

It is also understandable, but still a problem, that the media are drawn to follow the agenda of politicians, officials and schools in treating the provision of 'special' settings as the issue of overwhelming importance when it comes to education for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Integration may be difficult to achieve, as some articles stated, but it should be treated more frequently and seriously in media coverage given how strongly it is supported internationally and by experts.

Journalists we interviewed were very supportive when we asked about whether media workers and organisations would get involved in a new working group to encourage the involvement of people with disabilities in the media. Such a working group might also encourage journalists to address the balance of their coverage of education issues.

In the meantime, it is important that organisations representing the interests of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities follow the lead of groups such as AsIAM and Inclusion Ireland in putting forward spokespeople who themselves experience those disabilities.

Acknowledgements and authors

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Tomás Murphy is a graduate of the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities, where he completed the Certificate in Contemporary Living. He has represented the National Institute for Intellectual Disability (now the Trinity Centre) at conferences in the United States and elsewhere. Completing a Certificate in Research by Apprenticeship from Inclusion Ireland, he works two days a week in law firm A & L Goodbody. He serves on the board of Inclusion Ireland and, having completed a Certificate in Research by Apprenticeship from Inclusion Ireland, has researched and co-authored a number of reports.



Margaret Turley is a graduate of the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities, where she completed the Certificate in Contemporary Living. She has spoken at many conferences. She works at Ernst & Young and, having completed a Certificate in Research by Apprenticeship from Inclusion Ireland, has researched and co-authored a number of reports.



Chris Byrne was educated mainly in Canada, where he experienced a more inclusive school system than that faced by most children with disabilities in Ireland. Now a full-time researcher, having completed a Certificate in Research by Apprenticeship from Inclusion Ireland, he has researched and co-authored several reports.