

### Summary

The emphasis in education policy over recent decades has been on inclusion in mainstream schools and colleges. There has also been a focus on promoting the emotional well-being of young people. The 'What about us?' project enabled young people with learning difficulties in three localities to bring about changes in their schools and colleges. The areas they chose to focus on included representation through student councils, accessibility, feeling safe, influencing their learning and support through transitions.

The project demonstrated that involving and empowering young people with learning difficulties increases their confidence and self-esteem, as well as bringing about important changes in their educational settings. The findings suggest that students agreed with the policy direction, but believed it needed to be applied more rigorously and consistently.

### Introduction

This briefing explores ways in which students with learning difficulties can be empowered to promote their own emotional well-being and inclusion in mainstream schools and colleges. It is based on an action research project (Byers et al, 2008) funded by the Big Lottery Fund and carried out by the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities and the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge. Students with learning difficulties in nine schools and colleges were involved as co-researchers. Supported by teaching staff and the research team, they explored how they could initiate change and bring about improvements. The project demonstrated how user-led research can lead to positive developments in schools or colleges. This briefing is aimed at senior managers in schools and colleges, Ofsted inspectors and local and national policy makers.

### Background

Inclusion for students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream settings has been gaining momentum over the last quarter of a century. The Special Education Needs and Disability Act (2001) consolidated and amended previous education legislation, extending the right of children with learning difficulties to be educated in mainstream settings, unless the parents wish otherwise or it is incompatible with the efficient education of other children. The statutory guidance, *Inclusive Schooling*, suggested that 'nearly all children with SEN can be successfully included in mainstream education' (DfES, 2001). The Government's strategy for SEN, *Removing Barriers to Achievement*, accelerated the process, but also acknowledged the difficulties (DfES 2004a).

The move towards inclusion has been mirrored in the further education sector (LSC, 2006).

There has been encouraging research evidence on academic attainment. However the emotional well-being of some students with learning difficulties in mainstream settings has been a cause of concern. Dyson et al (2004) 'found evidence that pupils with SEN can and do make good progress academically... On the other hand we also found indicators that having SEN might be a risk factor for isolation and for low self-esteem.'

The mental health needs of children and young people have been recognised over recent years (Mental Health Foundation, 1999). The *Count Us In* inquiry highlighted the mental health needs of young people with learning difficulties (Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities, 2002). While schools and colleges are expected to promote emotional well-being (DfES, 2003; DH and DfES, 2005; QCA, 2007a), it has not been clear that young people with learning difficulties have fully benefitted from these initiatives, although they are a group who are particularly at risk (Emerson and Hatton, 2007).

The 'What about us?' project therefore explored with young people with learning difficulties how they could feel included and good about themselves in their educational settings.

The main findings from the research are discussed within the broader policy and practice context. Suggestions are made for actions in schools and colleges.

## The importance of user-led research

The students with learning difficulties, who were co-researchers on the 'What about us?' project, learned useful skills and provided powerful insights into how they felt about life in their institutions and what changes would enhance their lives. This corroborates the findings from other user-led research (Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities, 2005). This approach is also consistent with the framework for personal learning and thinking skills to be built into the new curriculum, under six headings: individual inquirers, creative thinkers, team workers, self managers, effective participators and reflective learners (QCA, 2007a).

The experience of being co-researchers improved the students' emotional well-being and self-esteem: one of the overall aims of the project. One young woman told a conference audience of 70 about the research and her ideas, something she would not have contemplated doing previously.

The co-researchers felt they gained respect from other students and staff. For example in one school they designed an outdoor social space. Some other students acted as learning mentors. The project was featured in the local paper. The students realised that they had made a major contribution and consequently they had a greater sense of belonging.

One of the key recommendations of the research is that schools and colleges should enable young people with learning difficulties to be involved in doing their own research in order to support their personal and social development, offer opportunities to practice transferable skills and promote their inclusion.

## The importance of listening to the young person

The students' voices proved to be important in bringing about change. Although young people have been widely consulted in recent years, young people with learning difficulties have often been overlooked. Article 12 of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN, 1990) maintains that 'state parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.'

Young people's views were sought for example, in the development of *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003) and the *National Service Framework for Children* (DH and DfES, 2004). The DfES argued that children and young people have 'important contributions to make to the design and delivery of the services they receive including education' (DfES, 2004b).

The report, *Aiming High for Disabled Children* (Treasury and DfES, 2007) states that children and young people and also their families should be empowered and enabled to influence services. The Treasury has allocated resources

for parent forums, but sadly no money has been made available for children and young people. There is still some way to go in ensuring that the voices of young people with learning difficulties are heard.

Although the research provides powerful evidence of the benefits of consulting young people with learning difficulties, it also suggests that adults do not always find it easy to engage with students in a way that allows them to influence practices. They sometimes doubt that young people with significant difficulties can express their ideas. Involving disabled adults in determining social policy is now well developed, but schools and colleges appear to be less receptive to the notion of involving these students.

It was noticeable that the school councils did not include young people with learning difficulties, although one school council had a member who liaised with students with learning difficulties. Some of the participants did not know that their school or college had such a council or the information was difficult to understand. Speaking Up!, who ran the project's reference group of people with learning difficulties, gave advice on developing easy read papers and enabling young people to run meetings themselves. As a result there were potentially exciting developments in schools whereby young people could either participate directly in the school council or be consulted by their peers so that they could effectively influence change. In one school, the co-researchers were consulted in the planning of new buildings and made a presentation to the governors and architects.

It is important that schools and colleges develop practices that enable young people to put their views forward for consideration on a regular basis – especially in relation to the planning processes that affect them. Staff may need training to enable this to happen.

## Feeling safe

The evidence of the young people in the research is that they are often anxious outside classes.

One of the outcomes of the *Every Child Matters* agenda involves 'staying safe' and 'being protected from harm and neglect' (DfES 2003). *The National Healthy Schools Status Guide* requires that schools provide a safe, secure and healthy environment in which students can learn (DH and DfES, 2005). Research from Mencap (2007) has shown that eight out of ten children with learning disabilities are bullied in schools and elsewhere with damaging results for their self esteem. The Department for Children, Schools and Families has produced guidance regarding bullying involving children with SEN and disabilities (DCSF, 2008a). It includes having a whole school anti-bullying ethos and listening to the young people themselves.

Some co-researchers described worries about moving round the building. Some said they did not like lunch and break times; they might have no friends to be

with or they might get picked on in playgrounds, social areas or common rooms. The young people wanted somewhere safe to go at break and lunchtimes so that they could relax. They wanted to be with other young people 'just like me.' They suggested that activities could be organised during non-teaching times in the school or college day and asked for support to be available to them if they needed it. Some schools and colleges have developed places for young people to go; one has developed a social garden area, another has started a gym club, or set up activities in the library. Opportunities for a quiet place, activities and for discreet support from adults when needed should be available for all young people.

It is clear that feeling safe in the school environment is an important issue to address with young people and particularly young people with learning difficulties.

## Accessibility

By consulting with young people with learning difficulties it was possible to identify barriers to inclusion. The Disability Discrimination Act (2005) created a disability equality duty on public sector organisations to promote disability equality in all aspects of their work. The Bercow report (DCSF, 2008b) has emphasised the importance of meeting communication needs.

By talking with the young people with learning difficulties, many of the problems identified were easily removed, yet they had had a big impact on the lives of the students in the respective institutions. In one instance a ramp was too steep for students using a wheelchair; in another the sinks were the wrong height. Lift signs were confusing and security gates caused problems accessing the shop. A toilet with a hoist and changing facilities was far away from the teaching base and it was difficult to get hold of the key. There were also concerns about the accessibility of information. Some schools and colleges involved in the research project were encouraged to develop the ways in which they communicated with the young people using pictures, symbols and sign language systems. In one instance student evaluation forms were redesigned. By asking young people with learning difficulties about their environment and changes that they would like to see implemented, it is possible to enhance their inclusion.

## The learning

In some schools the curriculum for young people with learning difficulties was constrained by GCSEs. In other schools and colleges there was an interesting range of courses and adaptations of the National Curriculum. As well as more academic subjects, there were courses in independent living skills and/or opportunities to try out different activities like carpentry, car maintenance or brick laying as tasters.

Reform of the education system for 14-19 year olds proposes that schools and colleges should make provision 'tailored to the talents and aspirations of individual young people.' (DfES, 2005). The development of personalised

learning in colleges is being encouraged for example by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) (2006). Its importance has been emphasised in the recent guidance from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) (2007b). This coincides with the agenda for person-centred approaches for adults set out in *Valuing People* and is reiterated and developed in the consultation document *Valuing People Now* (DH, 2001; DH, 2007).

The young people in the research project wanted more flexibility in the curriculum, barriers to learning such as inaccessible information to be removed and replaced with accessible materials that were appropriate for them and they wanted to be treated with respect. They valued being asked about how they liked the lessons to be conducted and working as a team. They wanted their hard work to be recognised.

The attitude of the managers was crucial as it impacted on the whole ethos of the school or college. In one college, most staff working with students with learning difficulties were part-time, hourly paid and would not know where they would be teaching from one year to the next. This had a negative impact. If time and resources are allocated for young people with special needs and there is continuity in staffing they are likely to find learning more rewarding. It was particularly helpful when managers listened to young people themselves.

The young people wanted help in developing their social skills and their resilience. SEAL materials have now been introduced at secondary level (DfES, 2007). They aim to build on the work of PSHE, citizenship, drama and art in promoting the development of social and emotional skills and may need adapting for young people with special needs.

Schools and colleges need to prioritise continuity of staffing. Teachers and tutors need to work with the students with learning difficulties to develop a curriculum and styles of learning that promote their skills for living and work and enhance their well-being.

## Transitions

Young people felt anxious at transitions for example from one school to another or from school to college. There has been a longstanding concern that transitions can be very distressing for young people with learning difficulties and their families.

Several initiatives have endeavoured to improve the process. For example, the report, *Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People* argues for individual budgets for young people, appropriate and accessible information, advice and guidance on services and support, joined up service provision and support from education to employment (The Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, 2005). Peer mentoring has been encouraged for example in *Youth Matters: Next steps* (DfES 2006).

The Council for Disabled Children (2007) has produced a transition guide for professionals funded by the Department for Children, Schools and the Family once more setting out procedures and good practice. *Valuing People Now* again emphasised the importance of person-centred approaches in transition (DH, 2007).

The co-researchers appreciated having visits or link courses when moving from one institution to another. One group made an information pack for future students. In one area, students from the special school were linked with college students and invited by them to come and look round which made them feel more confident. Two young people in planning for their future thought about a job. They said they wanted to have further regular work experience and gained placements in a local charity shop with staff support gradually phased out. One of the interviewees on leaving school wanted to continue with shop work.

Schools and colleges should work directly with young people with learning difficulties to plan carefully for transitions between settings and into post college opportunities. This resonates with current policy.

## Conclusions

Students with learning difficulties, when asked, have strong and original views on a range of issues relating to their education. These include their environment, their own safety, having a say in school councils, accessibility, their own learning, and making transitions. They have the potential to generate real improvements in their schools and colleges. When they are empowered to do research and bring about changes, their skills, inclusion and emotional well-being are enhanced. The findings resonate with the direction of government policy. It is important that the voices of young people are heard as policy is turned into practice. Students can provide a very effective check on policy implementation and quality. Involving the young people in this way is good for them, for schools and colleges and for policy makers.

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The report and findings from the project presented in an easyread version can found at [www.whataboutus.org.uk](http://www.whataboutus.org.uk)

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