

# What about us?

Promoting emotional well-being and inclusion by working with young people with learning difficulties in schools and colleges



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## Terminology

A variety of terms are used in this report to describe the challenges and barriers to learning experienced by young people, depending upon the context. The 'What about us?' project, for example, used the phrase 'learning difficulties' since this term tends to be preferred in educational contexts in the UK and, often, by young people themselves. The Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities, along with most services making provision for adults in the UK, uses the phrase 'learning disabilities' to refer to young people experiencing essentially similar problems. Other sources referred to in this report discuss pupils or students with 'additional needs' or 'special educational needs' (SEN) or refer to broad groups of young people experiencing a range of impairments, difficulties or disabilities. To avoid repetition throughout the report, when we allude to the 'young people', 'pupils' or 'students' who took part in the project, we are referring to 'young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs'.

Our use of terminology and many of the policies referred to in the report reflect the fact that the project's research activities were carried out in schools and colleges in England. We anticipate, however, that our methods and findings will have relevance for young people with special or additional needs in other contexts.

# Foreword

School, the happiest days of our lives? Perhaps not for all. For many it was a time to make long-lasting friendships, develop social and problem solving skills that will last us throughout life and, of course, gain qualifications. It was also a time when we may have fallen out with friends and experienced the insecurities of being a teenager. These incidents were often minor and lasted for short periods of time, but at the time felt like the worst thing in the world.

Inclusion for students with special educational needs in mainstream settings has been gaining momentum over the last quarter of a century. While there has been encouraging research evidence on academic attainment, there have been concerns about the emotional well-being of some students with learning disabilities or difficulties in mainstream settings. There is evidence indicating that pupils with learning difficulties are more likely to have less friends and have low self esteem. The Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities has been highlighting the emotional needs of young people with learning disabilities for a number of years. The report *Count Us In* (Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities, 2002) demonstrated the vulnerability of young people with learning disabilities to mental health problems.

The 'What about us?' project is the culmination of two years hard work from students attending nine schools and colleges across the UK. This was a piece of participative action research, in which the students themselves were active agents of the change process. The project enabled young people with learning disabilities or difficulties to bring about change in their schools and colleges to enhance their emotional well-being. The areas they chose to focus on included representation through student councils, influencing their learning, accessibility, feeling safe and support through transitions. The project demonstrated that listening to and empowering young people with learning disabilities or difficulties increases their confidence and self esteem, as well as bringing about important changes in their educational settings.

Some of the changes were relatively minor but made a huge difference to the day-to-day life of the young people while at school or college. Listening to the young people has given us a unique perspective and their ideas were ones that adults may not have thought of.

We hope staff and students will take these ideas on board and try them out in their own schools and colleges. I believe they will improve both inclusion and emotional well-being and enhance educational and life chances for students with learning disabilities in mainstream schools and colleges.



Dr Andrew McCulloch  
Chief Executive  
Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities

# Executive summary

## Introduction

'What about us?' was a participative action research project promoting the emotional well-being of young people with learning difficulties in inclusive secondary schools and colleges. The project began by reviewing the impact of inclusion on the emotional well-being and personal and social development of young people with learning difficulties. The project went on to develop strategies for overcoming barriers to inclusion suggested by young people themselves and explored through action research processes led by the young people.

The action research and development phase of the project was conducted in clusters of case study sites in three contrasting geographical locations in England. Young people with learning difficulties were involved as partners in the research through processes that were facilitated by the research team and staff in the participating schools and colleges. The young people who took part in the project derived clear and direct benefits from their involvement. The project's findings and recommendations have implications, in terms of enhanced opportunities for educational and social inclusion, improved quality of life and more effective education for personal and social development, for a wider group of young people, including those with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs.

## Background to the project

As more young people with learning difficulties and disabilities are included in mainstream schools and colleges, there is evidence that some young people experience isolation, marginalisation and bullying. There is also evidence that young people with learning difficulties are six times more likely to experience mental health problems than their non-disabled peers. The 'What about us?' project set out to engage young people themselves in the process of enhancing their experience of mainstream school or college inclusion.

In the course of the project, young people examined aspects of school and college life, including:

- what goes on in classes and between classes;
- different forms of support;
- activities out of school and college;
- plans for life after school and college.

The recommendations from the 'What about us?' project, focused on helping young people feel they belong, address these and other issues.

## Participating organisations

The Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities and the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education collaborated on the 'What about us?' project. Five secondary schools, two further education colleges, one independent work-based training organisation and one special school participated in the project. The schools and colleges were:

- Cottenham Village College, near Cambridge;
- Impington Village College, near Cambridge;
- Cambridge Regional College;
- Priesthorpe School in Leeds;
- Brigshaw High School and Language College near Leeds;
- Plymouth City College;
- Longcause School in Plymouth;
- Ridgeway School in Plymouth;
- Achievement Training in Plymouth.

The 'What about us?' project lasted for two years. Groups of young people with learning difficulties did action research work for about a year in each of the schools and colleges involved with the project.

## Project methods

Initially the project gathered the views of young people. The project then moved on to work directly with young people to find ways to help them feel more fully part of life at school or college.

Researchers from the 'What about us?' project enabled students and staff in mainstream secondary schools and colleges to work together, using an action research approach, to develop improved policies, practices and responses initiated by the young people themselves. Students and staff supporters worked together to:

- find out what could be better;
- make plans for improvements;
- make new things happen;
- watch and listen for any changes;
- think about what happened and discuss what to do next;
- change their plans to make new things happen;
- tell people about their work.

The young people participated in the project on a voluntary basis. They had support from project researchers and were able to withdraw at any time. Everyone involved in the project had support from an Advisory Committee of professionals and a Reference Group of young people with learning difficulties.



The young people in the schools and colleges participated in the 'What about us?' project worked together with the project researchers to agree the most important messages from the project. Review meetings were held at which project participants shared developments with each other and with other interested parties.

## Project findings

The 'What about us?' project used action research as a method to help young people promote improvements in their schools and colleges. In terms of research and development activity, we found that:

- doing research can help young people to feel better about themselves; enhance their sense of belonging; and promote important new skills attitudes and understandings;
- young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs can work very effectively as researchers and develop powerful and original ideas for school and college development;
- young people have the potential to generate real improvements in policy and practice.

The young people who participated in the 'What about us?' project told us that they are concerned about their experiences across the whole of the school or college – not just in lessons. They wanted to feel safe, secure and happy all the time. They said that they wanted designated 'safe places', sources of support or supervised activities to use when they are at school or college, especially in the stressful times between lessons.

We found that there are issues relating to communication, student voice and representation in schools and colleges. For example, it is not always easy for young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs to get their voices heard. Our work showed that these young people can make powerful contributions to school and college improvement – but we found that they were often not involved in student councils and other democratic and decision-making processes. The young people also told us that a great deal of information in schools and colleges is inaccessible to them.

In terms of transition and personalisation, the young people we met said that they wanted to be better informed about – and more involved in – planning major changes like moving to a different school or college. Our work demonstrated the value of supporting young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs in becoming involved in these processes and we found that young people value peer support systems and regard them as particularly effective.

In relation to teaching and learning, the young people and the adults involved in the 'What about us?' project agreed that what teachers teach is important – and that how teachers teach is also significant. We found that staff need more flexibility in developing their practices in these areas. What managers think and do can make a major difference – for example, through the support and training they offer staff who want to develop innovative, more facilitative and inclusive approaches. However, we confirmed that schools and colleges do essentially want to help young people – and we want our work to be used to encourage more schools and colleges to become more inclusive.

## Conclusions and implications for policy and practice

The 'What about us?' project generated findings at a number of levels, including the following recommendations:

- Schools, colleges and family members should enable young people to become familiar with the 'What about us?' project outcomes so that they are inspired to make a difference to the things that matter to them. Schools and colleges should help young people to do their own action research projects.
- By doing research, young people can contribute to school and college improvement – they have ideas that are new, different and important. We recommend that young people should decide what their research will be about and that they should carry out the research themselves.
- Schools and colleges should make sure that young people enjoy a sense of safety and security at all times across the school or college day. Schools and colleges should create, maintain and staff safe places, support or activities for young people to use when they need them – and particularly during the non-teaching parts of the day.
- Schools and college should do more to enable young people to communicate their ideas. Schools and colleges should ensure that all young people, including young people with learning difficulties, have active roles to play in democratic processes in school or college.
- Schools and colleges should learn to listen to young people and help them to access and share information more effectively and easily. Schools and colleges should ensure that all young people have the information they need in forms that are available to them.
- Schools and colleges should enable young people to take more active roles in planning for changes in their lives and, in particular, at times of transition.
- Schools and colleges should enable young people to help each other by implementing systems of peer support.
- Teachers and tutors in schools and colleges should be able to make their own decisions about **what** to teach. Staff in schools and colleges should negotiate aspects of curriculum content with young people.
- Teachers and tutors in schools and colleges should be able to make their own decisions about **how** to teach. Staff in schools and colleges should negotiate approaches to teaching and learning with young people.
- In order to make improvements in the response they make to young people, managers in schools and colleges should listen to young people and to staff.

We suggest that other schools and colleges should try out the approaches we used in the 'What about us?' project. The remainder of this report, and the 'What about us?' website at [www.whataboutus.org.uk](http://www.whataboutus.org.uk), provide the detail that colleagues will need to involve young people in developing improved policies and practices.

# Chapter 1

**Background to the project**



## Introduction

'What about us?' was a participative action research project that focused on promoting the emotional well-being of young people with learning difficulties in inclusive educational settings. The project began by reviewing the impact of inclusion on the emotional well-being and personal and social development of young people with learning difficulties. The project went on to explore and develop strategies for overcoming barriers to inclusion in ways suggested by young people themselves. The project addressed issues including: school and college environments; teaching, learning and curriculum; the non-teaching parts of the school or college day; social and extra-curricular activities; pastoral care and support; the role of specialist units; and planning for transitions.

The action research and development phase of the project was conducted in clusters of case study sites in each of three contrasting geographical, social and cultural areas in England. The institutions working with the project directly as case study sites included:

- five mainstream secondary schools;
- one special school;
- two sector colleges of further education;
- one independent provider of post-16 education and work preparation.

Young people with learning difficulties were involved as partners in the research through processes that were facilitated by the research team and staff in the participating schools and colleges. The project set out to:

- investigate the experience of inclusion of young people with learning difficulties by focusing on their own perceptions and responses;
- take account of the views of their families, including their siblings, and of non-disabled pupils and students;
- identify the factors that promote or compromise the emotional well-being of young people with learning difficulties in mainstream schools and colleges;
- develop improved practices and provide guidance, focused on enhanced inclusion, for staff and for students with learning difficulties;
- make recommendations for future policy and practice.

## The policy context

At the start of the new millennium, statutory guidance on *Inclusive Schooling* for children with special educational needs (SEN) (DfES, 2001a) suggested that ‘nearly all children with SEN can be successfully included in mainstream education’. This ‘positive endorsement for inclusion’ consolidated developments since the 1998 DfEE *Programme of Action*; summarised the requirements of the *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice* (DfES, 2001b), and the Disability Rights Commission *Code of Practice for Schools* (DRC, 2002a); and proposed that a firm foundation for developing inclusion existed in mainstream schools. Similar initiatives drove forward inclusive practices in colleges (FEFC, 1996; DfES, 2000; DRC, 2002b). The Government’s ‘Strategy for SEN’, *Removing Barriers to Achievement* (DfES, 2004a), while acknowledging that ‘barriers to learning’ and difficulties over implementation still persisted, consolidated and accelerated moves towards educational inclusion in schools. This policy shift was also reflected in the further education sector (LSC, 2006), driving forward inclusion in colleges.

These policies have been informed by a combination of encouraging research evidence (summarised, for example, by Sebba and Sachdev, 1997) and practice-focused development projects (for example, QCA/DfES, 2001; Byers, Dee, Hayhoe and Maudslay, 2002). Much of this work, with encouragement from the DfES and the Learning and Skills Council, has focused on attainment (particularly in basic skills) (FEFC, 1999; DfES, 2001c; DfES, 2002a and 2002b; DfES and LSDA, 2002).

At the same time, the Department of Health (DoH, 2001) has recommended working systematically towards the social inclusion of adults with learning disabilities. Yet very little is known about the influence that mainstream education may have upon the readiness of young people with learning difficulties to take on secure, well-adjusted and meaningful roles in adult society. The report of a recent working party (DfES, 2003a) suggested that work on young people’s personal and social development has always been, and may continue to be, one of the strengths of the specialist sector. While guidance is available to help mainstream schools consider mental health and social and emotional competencies and well-being for children (Mental Health Foundation, 1999; DfES, 2001d; Atkinson & Hornby, 2002; DfES, 2005a), there is little support for policy and practice in relation to the key area of emotional well-being and personal and social development for young people with learning difficulties in mainstream settings (McLaughlin and Byers, 2001).

This situation applies at a time when the implementation of the inclusive ideal is being subjected to critical scrutiny. Research into the policies of local authorities around England has suggested that some of them are, in effect, ‘abandoning’ the drive towards mainstream education for all (Rustemier and Vaughan, 2005) while Baroness Warnock, whose seminal report (DES, 1978) could be said to have initiated the thrust towards educational inclusion in the UK, has argued that inclusion policies lead to some young people experiencing isolation, marginalisation, unhappiness and disaffection within mainstream settings (Warnock, 2005). Baroness Warnock found some support for this position from research into inclusion and attainment sponsored by the DfES (Dyson, Farrell, Hutcheson, Polat, and Gallannaugh, 2004). Ofsted inspectors have suggested that enabling pupils with special educational needs to participate fully in school life remains a challenge for many mainstream schools (Ofsted, 2004) while work by MacBeath, Galton, Steward, MacBeath and Page (2006) has also raised questions about the impact upon young people of policies focused on inclusion. The ‘What about us?’ research project was located in this policy context and took account of these commentaries.

## The rationale for the project

The work of the Mental Health Foundation emphasises research into mental health issues, often using methodologies characterised by user involvement (see for example, Mental Health Foundation 1997 and 2000). Continuing this tradition, the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities recently published the results of its work exploring the experiences of young people with Down's syndrome making their transitions into adult life (Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities, 2007). However, the mental health needs of people who also have a learning difficulty have, in the past, been overlooked. In 2001, the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities therefore convened a one-year committee of inquiry into meeting the mental health needs of young people with learning disabilities. The terms of reference for the inquiry included reviewing and reporting on interventions to promote emotional well-being as well as exploring services, policy and practice for young people with learning difficulties who experience mental health difficulties. Two young people with learning difficulties acted as advisers to the inquiry and held focus groups with young people with learning difficulties in a range of settings, including a further education college. Additionally, the committee analysed 98 evidence forms completed by young people with learning difficulties. Young people indicated their distress at bullying and name-calling and their wish to lead similar lives to other young people. The committee's report, *Count Us In* (Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities, 2002), sets out the findings and recommendations from the inquiry.

The *Count Us In* inquiry took as its starting point a positive definition of mental health:

*'mental health includes a positive sense of well-being; individual resources including self-esteem, optimism, a sense of mastery and coherence; the ability to initiate, develop, and sustain mutually satisfying personal relationships and the ability to cope with adversity. . . . Mental health is mediated by the quality of interaction with others, societal structures and resources, and cultural values. Socio-economic factors – notably education, employment, income distribution and housing – play an important role.'*

*Jenkins, McCulloch, Friedli and Parker, 2002*

However, analysis of the Office of National Statistics surveys in 1999 and 2004 suggests that young people with learning difficulties are six times more likely to experience mental health problems than their non-disabled peers (Melzer, Gatward, Goodman and Corbin, 2000; Emerson, 2003; Emerson and Hatton, 2007). Research undertaken by Mencap (2007) suggests that eight out of ten young people with a learning difficulty have experience of harassment, bullying or violence in school or elsewhere, with damaging outcomes for their self-esteem. Inspectors have also raised concerns about the outcomes of mainstream education for some young people with learning difficulties in both schools and colleges (Ofsted, 2006; Ofsted, 2007).

The *Count Us In* inquiry explored concepts of risk and resilience and proposed that further research is needed into factors that promote emotional well-being and positive personal and social development in young people with learning difficulties. Research into what enables young people generally to cope with stress and challenge (Dee, 2003) suggests that school - and community-related factors include positive relationships and role models; safe, secure and inclusive environments; high expectations and shared values; a range of local opportunities; and wider supportive networks. It was not possible to explore fully the experiences of young people in mainstream settings during the inquiry. The Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities and the University of Cambridge therefore set up the 'What about us?' project in order to contribute to knowledge, policy and practice in this area.

This research was conducted in a policy context in which there has been increasing emphasis on consultation with young people (DfES, 2005b); upon the use of person-centred approaches and the personalisation of services (DoH, 2001; DfES, 2006a); and upon young people's social and emotional well-being. The *Every Child Matters* agenda (DfES, 2003b) focuses on 'staying safe' and 'being protected from harm' and emphasises that young people are entitled to have 'security' and 'stability' in their lives (DfES, 2004b). At the same time, schools and colleges have increasing flexibility in terms of the curriculum to make suitable plans to address young people's individual needs and preferences for learning (DfES, 2006a; QCA, 2007a; QCA, 2007b). The 'What about us?' research team, working in partnerships explored in detail in the following section, wanted to investigate the extent to which young people themselves could challenge the capacities of their inclusive schools and colleges to work more effectively to secure their own social and emotional well-being.



# Chapter 2

## The research partners





## The lead organisations and the core research team

The Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities, part of the Mental Health Foundation, is a charitable organisation. The Foundation promotes the rights, quality of life and opportunities of people with learning disabilities and their families. Much of this work is characterised by user involvement. For example, the Foundation worked directly with young people during the *Count Us In* inquiry to address the mental health needs of young people with learning disabilities. This project led to the production of a report (Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities, 2002) as well as accessible materials for young people with learning disabilities and their families and carers. Further work around mental health and emotional well-being led to a research programme focused on meeting the service needs of young people with learning disabilities and mental health problems, *Making Us Count* (Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities, 2005), and to the 'What about us?' project, looking at social and emotional well-being and mental health in inclusive schools and colleges.

Researchers from the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education worked with colleagues from the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities to conceptualise the 'What about us?' research. The University of Cambridge Faculty of Education offers students opportunities to study for undergraduate degrees, the Postgraduate Certificate in Education, awards based on practitioner professional development opportunities and an expanding range of higher degrees. The Faculty's expertise covers all stages of formal education, from early years and primary education to the post-compulsory, further and higher education sectors. Members of staff in the Faculty also engage in an extensive variety of research activities and have established expertise in directing research. Many recent projects carried out by Faculty researchers (see, for example, Dee, Byers, Hayhoe and Maudslay, 2002; Williams, Forgacs, Clare and Byers, 2005; DfES, 2006a) have involved partnerships between researchers, practitioners and service users. This expertise was of great relevance to the development of the 'What about us?' research.

## The schools and colleges involved with the 'What about us?' project as case study sites

The 'What about us?' project set out to work with young people, members of staff and family members in mainstream secondary schools and colleges across a 24-month time frame from October 2005 to October 2007. The clusters of schools, colleges and services we decided to work with were located in East Anglia, the North and the South West of England. The schools and colleges in these areas could not be said to be representative of aspects of policy and practice nationally in any systematic way. In many senses, they constituted a purposive sample (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000) since they were selected by the researchers, in negotiation with contacts in the relevant local authorities, on the basis of their suitability and their readiness to participate. Broadly the project's criteria for the selection of case study sites (see Appendix 2) could be met in the schools and colleges in these three areas and it was crucial to the progress of the project that the research team was able to work with staff and students who would be in a position to share, consolidate and further develop best practice in order to pursue the project's aims productively. The sites that participated in the project were:

- Cottenham Village College – a comprehensive community secondary school making provision for around 1,000 students in the 11- to 16-year-old age range in Cambridgeshire.
- Impington Village College – a comprehensive community secondary school making provision for over 1,000 students in the 11- to 19-year-old age range in Cambridgeshire.
- Cambridge Regional College – a general college of further education in Cambridge making provision for over 21,000 full- and part-time students.
- Priesthorpe School – a comprehensive community secondary school making provision for over 1,000 students in the 11- to 18-year-old age range in Pudsey in Leeds.
- Brigshaw High School and Language College – a comprehensive community secondary school making provision for almost 1,500 students in the 11- to 18-year-old age range in Castleford near Leeds.
- Plymouth City College – a general college of further education in Plymouth making provision for around 3,500 students in the 16- to 18-year-old age range and around 15,000 adult learners.
- Longcause School – a community special school making provision for around 85 students with moderate learning difficulties, communication difficulties and autistic spectrum disorders in the four- to 16-year-old age range in Plympton in Plymouth. All the pupils at Longcause have a Statement of special educational needs.
- Ridgeway School – a comprehensive community secondary school making provision for over 1,000 students in the 11- to 18-year-old age range in Plymouth.
- Achievement Training – an independent training organisation providing work-based learning for around 100 young people in Plymouth. Achievement Training runs a Post-16 Transition Training group specifically for school leavers with significant difficulties in learning.

All of these sites made provision for mixed male and female students. All of the sites made significant provision for students they regarded as having learning difficulties. However, the criteria used to identify students as having learning difficulties, and the judgements made about whether those learning difficulties were 'severe' or 'mild' varied from location to location. Young people who were successfully educated in a mainstream school or college in one area, for example, might be placed in a special school in another district.

As researchers, we were not trying to identify a homogenous sample of young people with identical learning needs across the project's three geographical areas or a statistically significant sample. We were content with the idea that each of the case study schools and colleges included young people regarded as having learning difficulties in that context. We were satisfied that these groups of young people would illustrate for the project (Miles and Huberman, 1988) the views of young people identified as having learning difficulties in different inclusive schools or colleges.

The provision made for students with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs in the case study schools and colleges that participated in the project included mixed groupings and a number of courses or learning opportunities designed specifically for learners experiencing difficulties. Eight of the schools and colleges were mainstream settings. Staff and students from one special school making provision for older students were encouraged to become involved in the research because they were already part of a network of providers participating in the research and, in Plymouth, Longcause School worked closely with Plymouth City College on transition. The project team set out to explore and develop existing links between this specialist setting and the mainstream site in order to:

- pursue the project's research themes;
- draw upon the expertise that may exist in specialist settings;
- ensure, where possible, that the views and experiences of young people with more significant learning difficulties and/or complex needs were acknowledged and represented in the research outcomes.

The project originally set out to involve a further education provider in Leeds but this proved to be impossible for a number of reasons outside the control of the project team or the settings concerned. To compensate, we were able to draw additional providers into the project in Plymouth and gained valuable insights into the roles that specialist and independent providers can play, in collaboration with mainstream and generalist settings, in supporting transitions for young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs. The next section provides further detail about strategies for supporting and sustaining the project and provides an introduction to the methods used in the 'What about us?' project.

# Chapter 3

## Research methods



## Research approach

During the 'What about us?' project, we invited staff and students in educational settings, including mainstream secondary schools and colleges of further education, to engage in participative, co-operative action research (Elliott, 1982) with members of the research team. Participative research has often emphasised the relationships between research and advocacy. Frequently, in this tradition, the power of the outcome is seen to be dependent upon the authenticity and immediacy of the voices of those participants who are able to 'tell their story of what happened' (Atkinson, 2002). The 'What about us?' research set out to capture this authenticity and to seek out the perspectives and points of view of those most closely involved in the enterprise of developing inclusive education – the young people themselves. We suspected that these views would be different from the views of adults – of professionals and parents, for example – and we felt, with Ruddock, Chaplain and Wallace (1996) and Davie and Galloway (1996), that it was important to explore them. We also wanted to adhere to the 'nothing about us without us' principles espoused by the advocacy movement (People First London, Change, Speaking Up! in Cambridge and Royal Mencap, 2000).

The project researchers therefore engaged with students and members of teaching staff in the schools and colleges participating in 'What about us?' as active co-researchers in the project. Family members, advocates, members of school councils, fellow students, teaching assistants and other professionals were also encouraged to participate, making the 'What about us?' research broadly inclusive (Walmsley, 2001). Members of the research team provided clear and consistent support for the practitioner and student co-researchers involved in the project. The project also sought synergies between research objectives and the current development priorities in the schools and colleges involved. Staff and students in participating case study schools and colleges were encouraged to work on issues that were significant and timely for them and that would drive forward improvements for young people (Oliver, 1992).

## Research purposes, questions and aims

The key purposes of the 'What about us?' research were:

- to involve young people with learning difficulties in participative action research;
- to explore and develop ways of enhancing the emotional well-being and personal and social development of young people with learning difficulties in mainstream schools and colleges.

In pursuit of these purposes, the project addressed a number of research questions:

- How do young people with learning difficulties experience inclusion? What are their own perceptions and responses?
- What are the factors that promote or compromise the emotional well-being of young people with learning difficulties in inclusive schools and colleges?
- How can policy and practice be developed in inclusive settings to promote more effectively the emotional well-being of young people with learning difficulties?

The 'What about us?' project set out to explore these questions in a number of contexts: in lessons and in the parts of the school or college day around and between lessons; in activities out of school and college; and in terms of plans for life after school and college. The project also wanted to find out what helps young people to feel they belong and to identify the forms of support that young people value.

Cycles of collaborative research and development, carried forward in the case study sites, enabled the project to pursue these purposes, questions and aims in overlapping phases of project-related activity. The language used to describe the phases of the project is related here to the accessible language used to describe action research (or 'making a difference') on the website prepared as part of the outcomes of the 'What about us?' project (for a full set of materials designed to be used with young people undertaking their own research, go to [www.whataboutus.org.uk](http://www.whataboutus.org.uk)). The phases followed Elliott's (1991) framework for action research as a tool for school self-evaluation and encompassed:

- a reconnaissance, or 'finding out', phase;
- a planning, or 'making a plan', phase;
- an implementation, or 'making things happen', phase;
- a monitoring and observation, or 'watching and listening', phase;
- a reflection, evaluation and review, or 'thinking and discussing', phase;
- a revision, or 'changing your plan' phase;
- further cycles of implementation, or 'making things happen', followed by further monitoring and review;
- a final reporting, or 'telling people about our work', phase.

## Participation and research supervision

Young people with learning difficulties studying in the schools and colleges participating in the 'What about us?' project were actively involved in project processes as co-researchers. Members of staff and students in the project's case study sites were engaged as full participants in the research process and were regarded as members of the research team. In support of this participation, the researchers provided guidance on working together and a project 'Code of conduct' (see Appendix 3).

The participation of the staff members and students in the schools and colleges involved in the 'What about us?' research was supported by the project's two part-time research associates. They were, in turn, supervised and supported by the research director and the project manager. The project also benefited from the expertise of a Reference Group of young people from Speaking Up!, an advocacy, training and consultancy organisation for people with learning difficulties based in Cambridge, and an Advisory Committee including specialists from the fields of educational and social inclusion, mental health, learning disabilities, schooling and further education and research.

The project's Reference Group of young people with learning difficulties, operating with support from Speaking Up!, assumed greater significance in the project than was originally envisaged. The initial intention had been for the Reference Group to 'shadow' the work of the Advisory Committee and to focus most of its energies on issues arising from the involvement in the project of young people with learning difficulties. Members of the Reference Group rapidly developed other ideas. They took on responsibility for chairing Reference Group meetings and preparing agendas and minutes. They became involved in all aspects of the project's work and contributed very significantly to many important developments, including decisions about research methods, approaches to analysis and dissemination strategy. Members of the Reference Group suggested that they should work in dialogue with the Advisory Committee rather than simply shadowing that group. They became proactive in bringing ideas to the Advisory Committee and, with the support of the project team and the Advisory Committee itself, proposed successfully that the Reference Group should be represented at Advisory Committee meetings in order to engage in live debate. In many senses, the work of the Reference Group of young people with learning difficulties became one of the most important strands in the 'What about us?' project and the productivity of this group, on a full range of project concerns, surpassed all our expectations (Lewis, Parsons, Robertson, Feiler, Tarleton, Watson, Byers, Davies, Fergusson and Marvin, 2008).

## Ethical considerations

Any project that significantly involves young people with learning difficulties clearly raises important ethical issues. The 'What about us?' project conformed to the ethical principles for conducting research with human participants established by the British Psychological Society (see Robson, 1993). The project also drew on the detailed work on participative research among young people with learning difficulties developed during the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities' previous projects and the *Enhancing Quality of Life* project (Byers, Dee, Hayhoe and Maudslay, 2002) funded by the National Lottery Charities Board and co-directed by the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

At the beginning of the project, members of the research team prepared an accessible leaflet, using photographs, symbols, pictures and simplified text, to give to potential participants to inform them about the project. This information leaflet included contact details for the research team and the research partners. When the leaflet was handed out, potential participants (and their families) were encouraged to make contact and to discuss the project with project staff in advance of making any decision about participation. At the point of initial contact, members of the project team also talked about the project with potential participants and sought to clarify the nature of the 'What about us?' research and the implications of involvement. It was explained that potential participants were able to opt into the project; to choose not to be involved; and, at any time, to withdraw.

Written permission was sought from participants, in advance, for collecting recordings, notes or transcripts of verbal contributions, photographs and video footage. These proformas (included on the 'What about us?' website at [www.whataboutus.org.uk](http://www.whataboutus.org.uk)) made it clear that participants could withdraw from the project, or from any specific project activities, at any time. These options were explained to potential participants as well as being set out on paper. Later in the project, after data had been gathered and subjected to review, project staff approached participants again and sought further confirmation of permission to use specific items in project reports, outputs and dissemination activities. Young people were given the opportunity to withdraw from the project database any item that they felt unhappy to share.



## Analysis

As data were gathered, analysis proceeded in the 'What about us?' project on two levels. The teams of young people in participating schools and colleges worked with the members of school or college staff supporting them, and with advice and guidance from the 'What about us?' research associates, in order to analyse the data from their own cycles of action research. These data included recordings of interviews; photographs; video footage; and drawings as well as written notes. The young people thought critically and reflectively about their data and drew from it proposals and recommendations that they shared:

- with members of the 'What about us?' research team during site visits;
- with one another at a project Review Day held in London;
- with school or college staff, governors and managers locally;
- with wider groups of policy makers and strategists at a variety of regional and national dissemination events organised through the project.

Project data were also analysed by the 'What about us?' research team, with the support of the project's Advisory Committee and the Reference Group of young people with learning difficulties. The data for this level of analysis included:

- all the data gathered by the teams of young people working as action researchers in the project's participating schools and colleges, both in its raw state and in the form of reports, dissemination materials and presentations after local analysis;
- all the data gathered by the project team as they carried out site visits, observations, interviews, meetings, discussions, feedback sessions and review activities in the case study schools and colleges.

Data analysis proceeded alongside research activity and data collection throughout the research phase of the project. Data analysis processes, including transcribing, coding, cataloguing, summarising, clustering and identifying themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994), were carried out collaboratively both within the project team and in co-operation with members of the project Advisory Committee and Reference Group. The consolidated findings from the project, representing both the views and conclusions of the young people who carried out their own cycles of action research in the project's participating schools and colleges and the broader overview achieved by members of the 'What about us?' research team, are presented in the remainder of this report. In order to comply with practice established in other participative research (Porter and Lacey, 2005), we have made accessible versions of our findings available to young people and their supporters, family members and carers on the project website (at [www.whataboutus.org.uk](http://www.whataboutus.org.uk)).

We make no claim for the statistical significance of these findings. We do, however, make a strong case for their authenticity since they are derived, in large part, from the perspectives and research activities of the young people who have directly experienced inclusion in the schools and colleges that participated in the 'What about us?' project. We would also suggest that these findings, although they are located in the specific contexts of the schools and colleges that participated in the 'What about us?' project, are illustrative of issues in the wider development of more effective responses to young people's social and emotional needs in inclusive settings. We would certainly argue that the project's approach, engaging young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs directly in action research focused on improvement in their own schools and colleges, has been immensely successful, both as a strategy for driving forward well-informed institutional development and as a means of promoting social and emotional well-being and enhanced inclusion. This finding is discussed in detail in the following section together with other outcomes from the 'What about us?' research.

# Chapter 4

## Project findings and recommendations



## Introduction

This section provides a detailed account of the findings from the 'What about us?' project and discusses their implications in terms of a series of proposals for policy and practice. Extended versions of the case studies used to illustrate the reportage in this section are included on the 'What about us?' website at [www.whataboutus.org.uk](http://www.whataboutus.org.uk). The 15 findings have been grouped into the following themes:

- Research and development;
- Feeling safe and secure;
- Communication and representation;
- Transition and personalisation;
- Support from peers;
- Teaching and learning;
- School and college culture.

## Research and development – key finding 1



**Young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs are able to work effectively as participants, and leaders, in action research processes focused on promoting improvements in their own schools and colleges.**

We invited the young people we met during the ‘What about us?’ project to design and carry out their own action research projects in order to see if they could initiate and bring about positive changes in their own schools and colleges, addressing issues that were important to them.

We had discussions with different people who worked at all of the schools and colleges involved in our project. We spoke to teachers, tutors, support staff, department leaders and members of management teams. They helped us to get a picture of how they saw young people with learning difficulties being included in their setting. We visited the schools and colleges several times. By doing this we were able to see what their ways of working were like and to get a sense of what was valued in each place. We saw lots of different ways of doing things and found out what worked well in different situations. The difficulties faced by young people and adults were also apparent.

We asked the young people for their ideas about their schools and colleges and about how to improve things. Case Study 1.1 gives an example of the sorts of things that happened.

### **Case Study 1.1 – college environment**

*Students in one college told us about difficulties with an inadequate sink in their art room. There was only one sink for a large teaching group and it was not accessible to students who used wheelchairs. The students told us they had been complaining about this for a long time without ‘anyone in charge’ listening. They knew their tutors had unsuccessfully tried hard to rectify this.*

*Project funding offered staff some flexibility, time and additional resources to support this group of young people. The students involved in the project started to work with their tutor in order to identify the good and not so good aspects of college life – initially by taking photos, sharing the images and discussing their views. They noted many practical things they wanted to change. They used their project work to send a clear message to college managers and were successful in getting a number of things changed – including a new, wheelchair-accessible sink in their art room.*

This way of working led to some surprises. The young people focused on a lot of interesting things that we had not expected – and some things we did expect to see were not happening in the schools and colleges we visited. We supported the young people, and the staff working with them, to undertake action research to initiate change. The young people made very positive progress. They had interesting views about schools and colleges and powerful ideas about how to make things better. Through action research, they showed us (and the staff and managers in their schools and colleges) how schools and colleges can include young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs more effectively and promote their social and emotional well-being – as Case Study 1.2 illustrates.

### **Case Study 1.2 – student voice**

*At one school, the young people working with the project invited a student council representative to their group. They talked to him about what was not so good at their school and the things that mattered to them. He went back to the council and told them. The council then asked the school to sort these things out. Some things changed almost straight away – small things, like providing lockers for young people to put their bags in or allowing young people to go to the toilet when they needed to go and not just at break times.*

*Then much bigger things started to happen in this school. The young people held an event to tell the staff, fellow students, governors and their parents about their work as researchers for the project and their ideas. They offered an insight into their life at school by sharing their views and findings using photos, video clips and a Powerpoint presentation. Their headteacher and the chair of the school's governors then invited the young people to repeat their presentation to both the school governors and some architects who were consulting on future plans for new buildings at the school. The headteacher felt these people needed to know the students' views about making the new building a more pleasant, more accessible and safer environment. The young people told the architects about what was wrong with the old school and what needed to be changed to make things better. The headteacher and the governors promised to listen to the young people regularly in the future.*

## Research and development – key finding 2

**Involving young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs in the processes of action research and institutional development can, in itself, promote enhanced social and emotional well-being and the development of important new skills, attitudes and understandings.**

The young people we worked with became thoroughly involved in their research. They worked hard and they worked on things that were important to them – things that mattered to them in their lives at school or college. By the end of the project, these young people all felt that working as researchers in this way had made a big difference. They had made important changes to their lives at school or college – but they also felt different in themselves, as is shown in Case Study 2.1.

### **Case Study 2.1 – feeling good**

*The students at one of our project schools, who all experienced significant difficulties in learning themselves, wanted to see if other young people shared their views about the school's learning support centre and set about planning their own research. As a group, they talked about the best ways to find out and decided to ask people. They developed a set of questions about the learning support centre and went out into the school to interview school students and staff.*

*All of these students gained skills and confidence from doing this work. One member of the group told us things she had not been able to do before the project. She said she had been unable to speak to or look at people, for example. But she helped with the interviews for the project. Then, at the end of the project, she stood up with a microphone in front of 70 people at a conference and told people about her research and the ideas she had developed.*

Some of the young people told us what a dramatic difference their work on the project had made to them. It had helped them to feel much more confident. They were better at communicating with a wide range of different people and in different settings. They had done things they would never have dreamed of doing and it had really changed them. By the end of the project, the young people were also able to do things they would not have been able to do before. Some students had been too shy or uncertain to speak to people or look them in the eye, for example. But during meetings and conferences we held at the end of the project, the same young people shared their stories and even stood up in front of large audiences, with a microphone, to talk about their ideas. The young people we worked with said that other people at their school or college knew who they were by the end of the project. This made them feel important and they felt respected and valued by their school or college community. As Case Study 2.2 illustrates, doing research had helped them feel part of things.

### **Case Study 2.2 – school garden**

*With the support of our project, the young people in one school decided they wanted to create an outdoor social space for use by the students in the unit. Working on their plans provided some very practical and meaningful contexts for developing literacy and numeracy skills. Other subject areas were also addressed – some in very creative ways – especially French and art. The students used their mathematics lessons in order to produce calculations in support of their designs and to cost each aspect, making decisions about what they could afford based on their limited budget. They assigned project roles within the group, building on the strengths and the interests of individuals. The young people developed new skills in saying what they thought and skills for working together, planning and negotiating to make the best decisions.*

*As the project work developed and interest across the school grew, the students from the unit gained respect from the rest of the school – from both their mainstream peers and from staff. Some mainstream students acted as learning mentors to some of the young people, offering peer support for aspects of the project that required specialist skills. Following all of this, the young people told us they felt more included; they now held a profile both within their school and out in the local community. They were featured in the school magazine and the local paper. They were proud of their achievements and keenly aware of the esteem in which they were held by others.*



## Research and development – key finding 3

### By doing action research, young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs can make a significant contribution to school and college development.

We asked young people we met what it was like at their school or college. We wanted to know what was good about their setting, what was not so good and what they would like to change. When we heard what was important to the young people, we encouraged them to do something about it. We worked with nominated adults in the schools and colleges that were involved with the project as case study sites and asked them to form groups of young people into research teams. We asked the adults to let the young people decide what they wanted to do for their part in the project by negotiating a focus for action research that was important to them. We guided this process by suggesting that the young people might want to find out more about why something worked well or to think about how they could change things to improve them.

Each young person in the project worked as a researcher in their school or college. They used what they found out to plan improvements and to drive forward changes in policies, practices, provision and environments. The young people were the ones who made the plans, took decisions and directed their project. It was not always easy for the adults involved to hand over control of the action research in this way. The degree to which young people were fully in control of their project therefore varied from site to site. In some settings, this process of devolving control (especially to students with special educational needs or to younger learners) entailed a substantial cultural shift and some degree of challenge to established ways of working. But, for the project team, getting the young people involved in working through their own projects became the most important part of our research. School and college staff were not used to standing back and letting the students run things. They had to learn to let the young people take the responsibility for their actions – to make some mistakes but to learn lots of new skills on the way.

The young people came up with some exciting and original ideas. They collected views and suggestions from other students and found out how things worked. They designed their own projects and did work that led to significant changes in their own schools and colleges – and often in other settings too. Case Study 3.1 shows how young people, given the right opportunities, can bring about positive changes in their own lives and in the policies and practices followed in the schools and colleges in which they work.

#### **Case Study 3.1 – lunch time**

*The SENCo listened to the young people in one school when they said they wanted something structured to do in the lunchtime break. He shared the views of these students with other staff and this prompted them to explore possibilities for lunchtime activities. When we next visited, we heard about some exciting new developments. The school had set up a lunchtime PE club for students with special needs, using inclusive and accessible games. The learning support centre now opened at lunchtime so that students with special needs could come in to use the computers. Staff in the school library developed some extended lunchtime activities to include board games and encouraged young people with special needs to come into the library at lunchtime to use the information technology facilities.*

## Research and development – key finding 4

### Insights from learners are powerful, original and important – young people can provide high-quality and innovative proposals for improvements in provision on a range of levels.

One aspect of the ‘What about us?’ research involved asking young people about their experiences of being at secondary school or college. We were particularly interested in what the young people thought and felt. We asked these young people for their views and ideas about schools and colleges all the way through the project.

With frequent opportunities and the sorts of support and encouragement illustrated in Case Study 4.1, the young people we met during the ‘What about us?’ project grew in enthusiasm and confidence in sharing their thoughts and ideas. By the end of the project, all the young people we met were keen to share their views. They were pleased to be asked – and they wanted their ideas to be heard. They told us about what was good about school or college, about what was not so good and about what they wanted to change. The young people had powerful and original ideas about how to change things for the better.

#### **Case Study 4.1 – council rep**

*In one school, the students we were working with needed to share the issues they were concerned about with people who could help them bring about improvements. We explored ways of getting them involved with the school council. We talked about the possibility of someone from their group attending a council meeting but no one in the group felt able to go to the council as an individual or even confident enough to speak to their form representatives.*

*Then the school SENCo invited a council member along to meet the ‘What about us?’ research group. This was the start of a very exciting way of working. The group worked together regularly with this council representative, telling him their concerns and sharing ideas about things that needed to be changed. This process turned out to be very productive and the students produced lots of ideas. They used a camera to capture in pictures the difficulties they experienced around the school. The council representative took their ideas back to council meetings and changes started to happen.*

We regarded the views and ideas of the young people we talked to as being important in their own right. It was interesting for us to gain some insight into how young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and special educational needs experience their education and the issues that matter to them. We regarded these experiences as being valuable (arguably more valuable than the views of adults) because they allowed us to develop a sense of what schools and colleges are like from the perspectives of their students. Arguably these perspectives provide a different (and highly relevant) view of what life is like inside schools and colleges and stand in contrast to the perspectives of staff, commentators and formal documentation. The young people gave us a sense of what school or college was like for them rather than what adults thought it was like. They gave us an 'insider view' of life in schools and colleges and revealed the extent to which young people felt that they genuinely belonged or felt excluded.

We helped the young people to develop their ideas into plans for research, action and development – and then to put these plans into practice. By the end of the project, all the young people we met had developed useful ideas for making their schools and colleges better – and many of them had brought about significant changes at a range of levels. The schools and colleges involved in the 'What about us?' project had learnt to value the contribution that young people can make to institutional development. Some of their ideas, plans and achievements are set out in the rest of this section and in the case studies that accompany it – as in Case Study 4.2. Hopefully these contributions will inspire further improvements in other settings.

#### **Case Study 4.2 – work experience**

*We interviewed two young men at one school and asked them to give us some ideas about developments they would like to see in future in school. Earlier in the year, both students had enjoyed a block work experience placement along with their peers in that year group. Now they both wanted to undertake further work experience. Since their 'alternative' options had come to an end in school, they could see an opportunity for regular, weekly placements working in a local charity shop. Involvement with the project, and the deployment of some project funding, enabled both young men to have staff support for this. In the first instance, each student had one-to-one support for the whole weekly work experience session; as the placement progressed, the support was phased out until each student was working independently.*

*Both students were interviewed mid-way through the placement in order to gather their reflections. They were asked what they would change to improve on the work experience. One responded by giving his placement 'nine out of ten'. When asked 'what would make it a ten?', he said that he wanted an opportunity to work on the cash register at the checkout. The next week, the member of support staff negotiated this opportunity for the students and the perfect score of 'ten' was achieved. One of these young men plans to go on to continue this type of work when he finishes school.*

## Research and development - discussion

Doing research clearly promoted well-being for the young people involved in the project and schools and colleges can use this awareness in order to help them to meet current policy demands, for example, those in the *New Secondary Curriculum* (QCA, 2007a) and the *Every Child Matters* agenda ('enjoying good physical and mental health and living a healthy lifestyle', DfES, 2003b). Promoting young people's emotional health and well-being is also one of the eight key areas of activity in the joint DoH and DCSF National Healthy Schools Standards initiative (DoH and DCSF, 2007). Further, the *Youth Matters* Green Paper suggests that schools and colleges are 'accountable for ensuring the well-being' of all their pupils and students, 'including those with severe and complex learning difficulties' (DfES, 2005b). Using the approaches developed during the 'What about us?' project will therefore help schools and colleges to focus on the social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) (DfES, 2005a).

The project also found that young people can make a powerful difference in their schools and colleges by undertaking research. This awareness can help schools and colleges to realise one of the five key outcomes in the *Every Child Matters* agenda, 'making a positive contribution', which entails 'being involved with the community and society' (DfES, 2003b). Further, the Government wants to encourage young people to 'develop enterprising behaviour' (DfES, 2004b) as one of the 25 specific aims in the national framework for change. The *Youth Matters* Green Paper also encourages professionals to 'empower' young people so they can 'shape the services they receive' (DfES, 2005b) while Government strategy sets out to provide disabled people with 'choice, empowerment and freedom' (Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, 2005).

Working with the approaches used during the 'What about us?' project will help staff to secure the 'greater involvement of pupils in the general life of the school' rather than simply drawing upon their views in consultation exercises (DfES, 2004c). As the project has demonstrated, young people (including young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs) can 'make a difference in their schools, neighbourhoods and communities' (DfES, 2004c) – doing research helps young people to feel better and enables them to make real contributions.

**We suggest:**

- Involving young people in doing research should become a key strategy for enhancing social and emotional well-being for students with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs.
- Schools and colleges should enable young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs to be involved in doing their own research in order to support their personal and social development, offer opportunities to practise important transferable skills and promote their inclusion.
- Involving young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs in doing research should become a key strategy for school and college improvement.
- School and college-based participative action research should focus on issues identified by young people and carried out by the young people themselves.
- Staff in schools and colleges should use the positive findings from the 'What about us?' project to stimulate participative action research in their own settings.

## Feeling safe and secure – key finding 5



**The ‘extra curricular’ parts of the day in school or college can be particularly stressful for young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs – for them, the whole day is important.**

Many of the young people we spoke to were reasonably happy with the way their lessons in school or college worked. They felt secure and confident about the time they spent in lessons. Lessons were seen as providing a structure so that young people understood what they had to do or knew that they could ask for support if they needed it. There were adults around during lessons to help them and to make sure other students did not take advantage of them.

Young people told us that they found it more difficult at other times in the school or college day. Some young people felt worried or anxious between lessons, for example, when they were often expected to move around the building or a large site. At these times, schools and colleges were often very busy. They told us how frightening it was to be on the stairs at busy times. Playgrounds, social areas or common rooms were often not seen as good places to go because young people felt that they might get picked on, teased or bullied when they were out of the classroom. Corridors and other spaces could be crowded or noisy and young people felt that they might be pushed or rushed.

Break times and lunchtimes were another part of the school or college day that could be difficult. Some young people did not know what to do at break times. Some of them said they did not have anywhere to go, or friends to be with. Sometimes their sense of vulnerability caused a lot of stress for young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs.

A lot of the young people told us that they brought a packed lunch instead of getting a meal at school or college. Sometimes this was because they did not like going to the canteen or dining hall. These places could be very busy and young people felt too rushed. Sometimes young people felt that it was difficult to carry a tray or to work out money when there were other people hurrying them; sometimes there was nowhere to sit. Case Study 5.1 illustrates these feelings.

#### **Case Study 5.1 – somewhere safe**

*When we first started working with the young people in the learning support unit of one school, they told us about their experiences trying to cope with the general hustle and bustle at break and lunchtime around the school's busy campus. The young people found these times of the day stressful. They had nowhere to store personal belongings (such as a school bag or a coat) safely so they had to carry all their possessions around all day to avoid things getting taken or misplaced. Some students felt unsafe when they were loaded with belongings and the narrow stairs were crowded. The young people told us that lunchtimes were a particularly difficult time of the day, because they had nothing to do and no staff supervision. They told us they felt that there was nowhere safe for them to sit and eat a packed lunch; they felt vulnerable and this made them feel anxious. They wanted somewhere safe to use at break times; somewhere they felt secure and where they could relax.*

## Feeling safe and secure – key finding 6

**Young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs say they need designated ‘safe places’, sources of support or supervised activities they can use if they wish to during stressful parts of the school or college day.**

The young people we spoke to told us that they wanted somewhere safe to go – or to join in with a supervised or organised activity – at break times and lunchtimes. As Case Study 6.1 indicates, we heard this story both in the schools and colleges that already provided a ‘safe place’ and in the sites that did not make this kind of provision.

### **Case Study 6.1 – common room or learning centre**

*The young people with learning difficulties at one college felt that they did not always get the same opportunities on campus as their mainstream peers. Social spaces tended to be dominated by large groups of students from mainstream courses and students with additional needs and disabilities did not feel welcome or safe using these facilities. They asked for a common room of their own – a place that was quiet; where they could be with their friends; and where they could listen to the radio if they wanted.*

*One school we visited already had a learning centre that students valued as a ‘safe place’ and a base for activities. Teaching was carried on in the centre, offering access to National Curriculum subjects or the wider curriculum through discrete provision for some students. The centre also operated as a familiar and secure physical space for some students. These students used the centre during break times, ‘free’ periods or other forms of ‘time-out’ from lessons. Students also knew they could go to the centre to seek support from familiar and trusted members of staff when they needed it.*

Some young people said they felt stressed and anxious at break times. They told us that they wanted places where they could be with other young people like themselves. They wanted places that were calm and quiet – places where they could relax and take time out, talk to friends or listen to the radio. They wanted somewhere where they did not feel anxious and where there would be someone they could talk to and who would listen to them. As Case Study 6.2 shows, some young people liked the idea of having adults around – in case they needed help or someone to keep a check on the behaviour of other students.

### **Case Study 6.2 – staff support**

*In one college, students routinely came into contact with a large number of staff and found it difficult to cope with this. These students tended to meet different members of staff each day. If a student had a problem and needed to ask for help, they were often unable to find their course tutor (who was, in fact, only on that college site during certain set teaching hours). As a result, effective support was often not available for these students when they needed it most.*



Several of the schools and colleges we worked with during our project made significant changes to their environments in order to address these concerns. One college is working to provide a common room that young people can use. One school is providing break time activities and is lobbying to improve its year group social areas. The students in another school came up with a group plan to develop a social area they could use. They designed, negotiated resources and built a social garden area near their teaching area. This has been so successful that their school has decided to build more social areas – and to use the young people as researchers and consultants again. As Case Study 6.3 shows, many of the sites we visited during the ‘What about us?’ project had well-established units, centres, sources of support, activities or spaces that young people could use when they felt they needed to.

### **Case Study 6.3 – support bases**

*Another school we worked with had a designated local resource base for pupils with physical disabilities housed in a specially designed and designated building. This centre provided educational and therapeutic support for these students and made assistive technologies available to them. The centre was also used by a wider group of students with special and additional needs as a ‘safe place’. Many young people chose to go there at break or lunchtime, as the centre was seen as offering some respite from the hustle and bustle of a typical secondary school campus. Students knew they could find a quiet space here, seek the support of a member of staff or simply talk to someone who would listen.*

*Elsewhere in the same school, there was another separate building that provided a further discrete support base for students experiencing a range of difficulties with learning. It offered teaching in small work groups and individual support. It was a place where identified students could get extra guidance to help them ‘catch up’ with their studies or where they could undertake alternative curriculum options– for example, we met one group who were following an accredited life skills programme. Students also used the space at break and lunchtimes or dropped in when they felt they needed help from the teacher who ran the base.*

## Feeling safe and secure – discussion

Young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs want to feel safe and happy in their schools and colleges all the time – not only during lessons. Interestingly, one of the outcomes of the *Every Child Matters* agenda involves ‘staying safe’ and ‘being protected from harm and neglect’ (DfES, 2003b). The Government’s national framework for change relating to *Every Child Matters* states, among other things, that children and young people should be:

- safe from maltreatment, neglect, violence and sexual exploitation;
- safe from bullying and discrimination;
- safe from crime and anti-social behaviour in and out of school;

and further that they should have ‘security’ and ‘stability’ and be ‘cared for’ (DfES, 2004b).

This is important because working within ‘safe, secure and inclusive environments’ is seen as one of the factors likely to promote or protect young people’s self-esteem, resilience and sense of self-efficacy (Dee, 2003). The Government also wants to ensure that young people are enabled ‘to achieve personal and social development and enjoy recreation’ (DfES, 2004b) and asserts that schools should be concerned with extending their responsibilities into a range of areas beyond the classroom (DCSF, 2007).

Our findings, derived from the views of young people themselves, are thus closely in tune with broad policy and schools and colleges will wish to take account of this congruence in order to meet expectations. For example, the National Healthy Schools Programme encourages schools to be concerned with all aspects of the school day and the school environment. This concern should encompass lunchtimes and environments for eating; the use of outdoor spaces; social and recreational activities outside lessons; toilet facilities; display areas – and ‘hotspots’ where young people may feel vulnerable (DoH and DCSF, 2007). Interestingly these points precisely mirror many of the concerns expressed by young people in this research.

Providing a designated place of safety, or a haven, for a specific group of young people is not inconsistent with current thinking about inclusion, which now transcends a focus on location and shared physical space. For example, the DfES has defined inclusion as being about ‘the quality of a child’s experience’; access to ‘high quality education’; and the provision of opportunities that enable young people to ‘progress with their learning’ and to ‘participate fully in the activities of their school and community’ (DfES, 2006b). The latest guidance on bullying involving children with special educational needs (DCFS, 2008) advocates a whole school approach in which schools should promote positive images of disability and provide lunchtime clubs, quiet spaces and trained peer supporters to support children who have a greater risk of being bullied. The guidance emphasises the need for preventative as well as reactive strategies to combat bullying.

Norwich and Gray (2006) see the use of specialist facilities as one of the 'stages of the process' of developing inclusivity. They discuss the importance of 'balancing common and different aspects' of the educational experiences of young people and emphasise that educational provision has a number of inter-connected dimensions including the curriculum, participation and location. In this model, schools and colleges might be working towards 'greater commonality' (Norwich and Gray, 2006) by emphasising the shared, inclusive curriculum and participation in school democracy, teaching and learning opportunities and extra-curricular activity – even though young people may be enabled to make use of separate environments for parts of the school or college day. The existence of separate environments, within the inclusive mainstream campus, for the use of young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs, as recommended by the young people involved in the 'What about us?' research, is entirely consistent with this position.

**We suggest:**

- Secondary schools and colleges should implement policies and practices designed to foster the social and emotional well-being of students through the whole day.
- Secondary schools and colleges should provide staffing and develop and sustain practices that support students moving between taught sessions and during break times and lunchtimes.
- Secondary schools and colleges should provide designated 'safe places', sources of support and/or activities for all young people who feel vulnerable to use when they need to.
- These safe areas and activities should be available to young people particularly at break times, lunchtimes and in study periods. Staff should be available in these areas so young people can ask for support should they require it.

## Communication and representation – key finding 7



### Young people can experience difficulties in expressing their views and ideas about life in school and college – there are barriers to student voice and representation.

The views and ideas of young people were crucial to our research and we asked young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and special educational needs to tell us about their lives at their school or college. We explained to the young people that we wanted to listen to their ideas and experiences and help them to do something to make their lives better at school or college. But at the start of the project, many of the young people we met had little confidence when we asked for their views about what was important to them.

#### **Case Study 7.1 – young people's views**

*In one college, we spoke to young people about their experiences of and views about college life. Initially some of these students found this difficult, because they were not used to being asked for their opinions. We asked about their involvement with college or departmental student councils. None of the students we spoke to was aware of the existence of the student council or felt that their views were being sought. As we discovered, however, these young people had very clear views on what was good, what was not so good and what they wanted to change at their college.*

As Case Study 7.1 shows, this was often because the young people had not had enough experience of being asked. At first, they might say things they thought they 'ought' to say. They told us things their parents or teachers might say or things they thought might please us. Some of the young people we spoke to were not really sure, at first, what their views were. This might have been either because they had not considered what they thought, because they were unsure how to express these ideas or because they had never been asked. Gradually, and with the project team and members of staff and peers in their schools and colleges offering the right kinds of support and encouragement, the young people we worked with became more confident and enthusiastic about sharing their thoughts and giving their views.

The young people we met told us what was good about school or college, what was not so good and what they wanted to change. These young people had powerful and important ideas about how best to change things for the better and, as Case Study 7.2 indicates, we did not meet anyone who was unable to contribute meaningfully to the project by offering their views.

### **Case Study 7.2 – school environment**

*Several of the young people who worked on the 'What about us?' project in one school had long histories of school changes when placements had not been successful. Initially they were not very confident in sharing their views and did not even appear to be sure what their views were on issues that should have mattered to them. As individuals, these young people viewed themselves as powerless and felt that no one would listen to them. They were self-deprecating about their abilities and very unsure of their capacity to make any kind of difference.*

*As we were shown around the school by these young people, they began to highlight the good features, things that were not so good and, importantly, those aspects of school life that they would like to change. This practical approach to accessing their ideas proved to be more productive than questioning and discussion. It was useful as a process for eliciting their views because it provided real time, real life prompts for their responses. As we visited different locations and facilities in the school, the young people were prompted by the situational cues to express their opinions and to begin to explore some insightful ideas for improvements.*

## Communication and representation – key finding 8

### **School and student councils and other processes for consultation and developing school or college democracy frequently do not include young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs.**

Most of the schools and colleges we visited had a school or student council. But, at the start of the project, only one council included young people with learning difficulties effectively in student council processes. When we asked young people about the student councils in their schools or colleges, most of them did not know much about them. Most of the young people we spoke to, like those in Case Study 8.1, did not know what student councils were or how to get involved. They did not feel they were involved in any meaningful way, even when they had heard about the student council. Sometimes information about student councils was simply too difficult to understand or was presented in unhelpful ways. In some schools and colleges, the student council had become an activity that was only accessible to the most popular or the highest attaining students. The young people we talked to wanted to be a part of council activities with their other friends in school or college.

#### **Case Study 8.1 – representation**

*The college of further education in one city had a modern site and many facilities for its large population of students. The college provided a good range of general student support services and these services were clearly advertised in the main concourse of the college. The college also had a well-established student council. The students with learning difficulties we met were, however, unaware of the student council and were certainly not represented on it. It seemed that thinking about inclusivity had not extended to the student council.*

In some schools and colleges, the adults were not helping with this. They felt that involving young people with learning difficulties in council meetings in a meaningful way was too difficult. These adults thought that these young people would find it hard to make decisions or to come up with proposals for developments or improvements. They felt that the meetings would be hard to follow and that the minutes or records from these meetings would be hard to understand. Not surprisingly, the young people themselves often thought the meetings would be too difficult to understand too. As a research team, we made a series of suggestions about how schools and colleges could make councils work better for young people with learning difficulties. We had developed these ideas by working with our Reference Group of young people with learning difficulties. As Case Study 8.2 shows, members of this group helped us to prepare easy-to-follow agendas and minutes for our meetings and to develop ways of enabling young people to run the meetings for themselves. There is more guidance about how to run accessible meetings on the 'What about us?' website at [www.whataboutus.org.uk](http://www.whataboutus.org.uk).

### **Case Study 8.2 – better meetings**

*The members of the 'What about us?' Reference Group helped us to make easy-to-follow lists of what we needed to do in meetings and records of the things we had discussed. We had different ways to do this for different members of our group. Some people liked words or text; some people found it helpful to have pictures or symbols to give them the idea of what that item was about. Some people liked photos best. We made sure these materials were sent round to young people in plenty of time so they could work through the ideas, with support if they needed it, before the meeting.*

*The young people ran the meetings for themselves. They made time at the start of the meeting to go over any papers that had to be discussed so everyone understood the main topics. They used 'ice breaker' activities to make sure everybody had a chance to contribute something at the start of each meeting. During meetings, we used lots of Powerpoint presentations to make sure ideas were presented to young people in interesting and exciting ways. One of the supporters would also keep notes and make drawings (graphic facilitation) on big pieces of paper on the walls as the meeting went on.*

*Members of the group made sure there were plenty of breaks during meetings for people to relax, have a drink, catch up with ideas or use the toilet. They took it in turns to be in charge of the meeting and to introduce agenda items – often playing a kind of 'pass the parcel' game with music so that each person got a chance to open the next agenda item and introduce it when the music stopped. These meetings were a lot more fun than most meetings – and we got a lot of good work done. Everyone agreed they were better meetings.*

During the project we saw some exciting changes to do with student councils. Some schools and colleges asked council representatives to listen to views and ideas from young people with learning difficulties. Then they helped to change things:

- in small ways – like getting lockers to keep bags safe;
- in big ways – like getting architects to listen when they were planning to build a new school.

During the project, we saw significant and positive change being driven by young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs through their engagement with student councils. These approaches showed that these young people can be very effectively involved in existing consultative and democratic processes in their schools and colleges (including student councils). This can work either through direct representation or through consultation with peers who are council members. We found that the involvement of young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs can enhance the powerful contribution that student councils can make to school and college development.

However, some adults felt that asking young people what they thought was too difficult – or that the young people would not understand. Some of the adults said that it was especially difficult for young people who did not speak or who found reading difficult to share their ideas. We made suggestions for supporting these young people to join in – using symbols, pictures or sign language systems, for example. It seemed that it was hard for the adults to remember to listen to the views of young people regularly or to encourage them to ‘take the lead’. In many cases, the teachers had to change their ways of teaching to make sure that they enabled students to express their opinions – and that student’s ideas were respected and valued.



## Communication and representation – key finding 9

### Information in schools and colleges is not always presented in ways that are accessible for young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs.

Young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs often find reading difficult, especially when words are used on their own. But in all of the schools we visited and in some of the colleges, staff used a lot of text in their teaching – and, as Case Study 9.1 suggests, when sharing other forms of information.

#### **Case Study 9.1 – school council**

*When we visited one school, it was clear that there was an established student council, with the minutes of meetings displayed on the council notice board. However, none of the young people involved in the ‘What about us?’ project felt informed about or involved in the workings of the council. None of the students was sure who their form or year representative was. Some of them knew about the noticeboard but felt that the information about the meetings (for example, the minutes) was too difficult to understand. They were not aware of any changes resulting from the work of the council or any impact the council had had on school life.*

These schools and colleges also often expected their students to understand people speaking – even when the young people communicated in different ways, for example, using a sign language system like Makaton or British Sign Language. Some young people found it hard to join in discussions or to talk about their ideas in lessons. They sometimes found it difficult to understand the topic or to remember what they were expected to think about. Some young people had hearing or visual impairments and, if staff did not make adaptations, further barriers to understanding and participation were created.

As Case Study 9.2 shows, we offered these schools and colleges ideas for making information more accessible. We suggested, for example:

- ways to make things easier to read;
- ways to help young people to think about ideas;
- different ways for young people to share their ideas, other than speech.

#### **Case Study 9.2 – visual materials**

*When the young people who became involved in our project were given ideas in a different or additional way – in words or pictures, for example – it helped them to understand or remember what the discussion was about. For example, they might have a set of topic photos, words or pictures on the table or an adult might make a visual record on the board to help them focus on the topic or to record their ideas. With this type of support they could often join in and ‘say’ a lot more. This made the young people feel good about themselves – they found that they did have something to say and a way to say it that others could understand. Using visual materials helped the young people to join in, to participate and to feel included.*

Student input can also help staff to see how materials can be developed so they promote understanding and participation. In some of the project sites, as shown in Case Study 9.3, young people were asked what was best for them. They were shown different ways to access and share ideas and information and were invited to choose an approach that suited them personally. The young people each had different views on what was best, but they did know what they preferred themselves. When young people were given ideas in a different or additional way – in words or pictures, for example – it helped them to understand or remember what the discussion was about. Everyone thought it was easier to understand information when it had some pictures or images – even the adults preferred it. This easy-to-access information helped young people to feel more confident and included. It gave them a feeling of control because they could have a say and make decisions. They could make plans and run meetings – and make records of the meetings that everyone could share.

### **Case Study 9.3 – evaluation**

*One of the colleges we visited asked their young people to help them redesign the college evaluation form so that more students could be involved in giving their views. The old form had difficult questions using writing and number scores to ask students what they thought about college, their courses and their tutors' work. The adults asked the students how they could change the form to give a better understanding of the questions and how to complete the form. They have tried out several different versions of the form so far. They are now using symbols and pictures to support the text, so that people can see easily what each question means. They think this improved form will also be very useful for other student groups in college – like people who have problems with reading or those who use languages other than English. They are still working on new ways to get it right.*

## Communication and representation - discussion

The fact that many mainstream schools and colleges do not manage to make information accessible is surprising. The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN, 1990, Article 13) states that children should have the right to 'seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds' and that information might be presented 'either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice'. Article 12 (UN, 1990) states that children should have the right to express views 'freely' in all matters affecting them and that the views of the child should be given 'due weight'. Services should 'put young people themselves in control', according to the *Youth Matters* Green Paper, so that they have 'more influence' (DfES, 2005b). The findings of the 'What about us?' project suggest that this is not always happening, even though 'taking account of the views of young people' is one of the guiding principles behind the establishment and development of the Connexions Service (DfEE, 2000). Further, the adult policy guidance in England for adults with learning disabilities, *Valuing People*, asserts that people with learning disabilities 'are capable of making choices and expressing their views and preferences' (DoH, 2001).

The fact that many student councils do not include young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs is also surprising since policy endorses such involvement. The Government's Children and Young People's Unit encourages the development of 'young people's advisory or decision-making bodies' and notes that 'special care' should be taken to include, for example, young people with special needs (Children and Young People's Unit, 2001). Further, the Government recommends that 'all children and young people should be involved in as wide a range of decision-making processes as possible' (DfES, 2004c) – and proposes that all young people can be involved in 'making a contribution' – one of the five outcomes of the *Every Child Matters* agenda (DfES, 2003b). The Government wants young people to 'engage in decision making and support the community and environment' (DfES, 2004b) as one of the aims in its national framework for change. School councils can help young people to contribute to decision-making processes at at least three levels (DfES, 2004c):

- at the local level – and in relation to the wider community;
- at the institutional level – making decisions about how to improve the school or college;
- at the class level – considering issues for the class, year group or the whole school or college.

Recent guidance proposes that children and young people should be seen as 'major stakeholders in society' since they have 'important contributions to make to the design and delivery of the services they receive, including education' (DfES, 2004c). Indeed, fostering participation is one of the elements in the drive towards the development of more healthy schools (DoH, DfES and NCB, 2004). Policy makers propose that no-one should be excluded from involvement. Guidance on *Personalising the Curriculum for 14 – 25s with Learning Difficulties* suggests that staff should undertake to 'listen' to learners and to support learners to 'make choices about, and take charge of' their own lives (QCA, 2007b). Schools and colleges should see themselves as being involved in this broad agenda for change. They need to find ways to involve those who 'may appear to lack confidence or motivation' or to be 'less articulate' (DfES, 2004c).

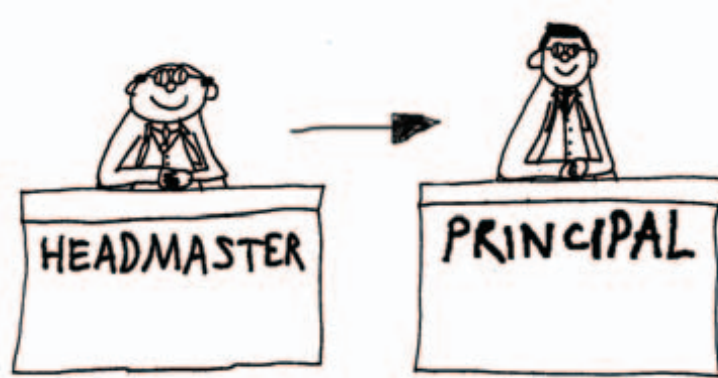
As we found during the 'What about us?' research, this may mean providing 'special support' for those 'facing the greatest barriers' (DfES, 2004c) – including those with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs. Circle Time (Taylor, 2003 and see [www.circle-time.co.uk](http://www.circle-time.co.uk)) can be a good way to help young people to develop the skills they will need in more formal settings for debate and discussion.

The students who worked with the research team would also suggest that information must be accessible. They recognised, with others, that the capacity to communicate – to understand and to be understood – is crucial to the mental health and emotional well-being of young people (DfES, 2001d). Our experience during the 'What about us?' project confirms that young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs, with the right kinds of imaginative support and guidance, can make telling and innovative contributions to the processes of school and college development.

**We suggest:**

- Young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs should be actively, regularly and routinely consulted about their educational experiences and their views about life in school or college.
- Support should be provided to enable young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs to express their ideas about school or college development.
- Schools and colleges should review the role of student councils and the ways in which they work so that young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and special educational needs have meaningful access to student council processes.
- Schools and colleges should enable all young people to participate in democratic and decision-making structures so that they can make a full contribution.
- All schools and colleges making provision for young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs should make available, as a routine aspect of policy and practice in relation to accessible communication, means of augmenting or providing alternatives to spoken language, reading and writing.
- Information in schools and colleges should be personalised to address the communication needs of all young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs.

## Transition and personalisation – key finding 10



### **Young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs want to be more effectively involved in planning school–college transitions and exit pathways from college.**

Many of the young people we met during the project told us that they felt anxious when things changed. For some young people, even small changes mattered a lot. The most difficult thing was not knowing or not being told about changes. Young people felt they could cope better if they were prepared. The young people we spoke to told us about their difficult experiences when they moved from one school to another or when they moved from school to college. A lot of them had felt very worried and anxious at this time. They were worried before they moved – and they were worried when they started at the new place.

Some young people had been given a chance to visit the new class, school or college they were moving to. They were able to find out for themselves all about the differences at this new place and this made them feel happier. The young people found it especially helpful when they were able to hear what things were like from other young people. They wanted to know practical things about what to do, who to ask for help and where to go. It was helpful for young people to find out about the different names for places or the ways people were addressed in their new placements. For example, at college, students often call the people who teach them ‘tutors’ and use their first names. In school, pupils usually call their teachers by their formal names. At school, pupils go to the ‘dining hall’ or the ‘canteen’ at lunchtime. At college, students use the ‘refectory’ or cafes (like ‘the buttery’ or ‘the diner’) for meals. Young people said it was important to know about these things before starting in a new place. During our project, some groups of young people, like those in Case Study 10.1, made presentations or information packs to show new students how things worked and who to talk to in the new school or college setting.

### **Case Study 10.1 – transitions**

*The young people at one college remembered their feelings of moving from school to a big, new place where everything seemed different – even the words used to describe people and places. They decided they could help make this time better for new students in the future and they set out to make college information and course prospectuses more accessible and user-friendly. They used a camera to take pictures of the things they thought new students needed to know about. They photographed crucial locations around the building – classrooms, toilets, cafeterias, the reception area – as well as the key people who worked with and supported students with learning difficulties. The students thought about how to present their information in the most accessible way for new students. They made booklets, using photos without words or with a few words, designed to help new students making their transitions to college.*

*The students also came up with the idea that talking to new students directly might be a good way to prevent them from feeling anxious about the move from school to college. They planned a series of school visits. They wanted to give their booklets to school pupils and to tell them what arriving at college for the first time was like. They wanted to tell the school pupils about the people they needed to know (in case they needed help) – and to show them that not only had they survived, but that they had come to love their time at college. This work generated and developed links that will be of huge benefit to students making the transition from school to college in years to come.*

We felt that staff in schools and colleges needed to involve young people much more closely in making plans about their own lives, taking account of their past experiences, their preferences and their future options. Essentially this meant working in more person-centred ways (see Appendix 4) – and this entailed a shift in style, approach and ethos for many teachers.

## **Transition and personalisation - discussion**

Effective transition planning is crucial and the Government has made a commitment to 'improve the quality of transition planning' (DfES, 2004a). This will entail making practice more person-centred in line with the Government's own strategy for *Valuing People* (DoH, 2001) and policy on *Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People* (Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, 2005). Recent guidance (see also Dee, 2006) proposes that the learner should be 'at the centre' of transition planning so that 'the curriculum and the services they require are tailored to meet their individual needs, interest and aptitudes' (QCA, 2007b). Transition planning carried out in this way will, it is suggested, help learners to 'realise their personal aims and aspirations' and 'enable rather than constrain' their transitions to adulthood (QCA, 2007b).

The student researchers involved in the 'What about us?' project would agree that young people should be engaged as 'active partners' in the development of plans for their education – and fully involved in any planning that concerns them or their futures – if their learning is to be truly personalised (DfES, 2004a). The experience of involvement at this level will help to prepare them for 'taking greater control over their lives' (DoH, 2001) in their adult futures through the use, for example, of the direct payments that have been championed as a 'key element' of the Government's vision for future responses to the needs of people with learning disabilities in the *Valuing People* White Paper.

**We suggest:**

- Schools and colleges should 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.
- Schools and colleges should work directly with young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs to plan carefully for transitions between settings and into post-college opportunities.

## Support from peers – key finding 11



**Young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs welcome support from peers and regard schemes that promote support between students as especially valuable.**

Although the young people we met during the project found support from adults very helpful, they sometimes did not want adults around because it made them stand out as different from everyone else. The young people we spoke to liked to have the help of another student (a buddy) – and, as Case Study 11.1 shows, they liked to help others too.

### **Case Study 11.1 – getting involved**

*One school we worked with had an established and active student council. The young people we met during the 'What about us?' project all knew about the council and felt both informed and involved in its working processes. In the course of the two years we were involved with the school, three members of our project group, who all experienced difficulties in their learning and who all had additional needs, were elected, at different times, as student council representatives. They worked directly with our project group of young people, feeding research project findings back to the student council, as well as representing their tutor groups. Two of the representatives worked together and felt effectively supported by operating as a pair in order to carry out their duties.*

Some schools and colleges started buddy systems during the project. These buddies helped young people:

- when they were new to the school or college;
- when lessons or activities were difficult.

Young people told us that it was great to have an older student to show them around when they had just arrived at a new school or college. Their buddy could tell them how to find the rooms they needed to be in, what they needed to take with them and who to see if there was a problem. We also saw examples of buddy systems working during 'link' experiences before school students actually arrived at college. In these initiatives, college students invited school students into college and acted as guides during the visits. The college in Case Study 11.2 linked new students up with young people who had previously been students in the same school.



**Case Study 11.2 – buddies for change**

*Having a buddy can be a big help when students move from school to college. In one of our sites, young people who were about to move to college met up with college students who used to be at their school. The college students invited the school students into college for 'link' experiences and showed them around. The young people from the college were the 'experienced' buddies – they remembered what it was like to be new in college and how anxious they had felt and this helped the visitors feel happier and more relaxed about going to college. They could see that their college friends had 'survived' being new. Later, when the school students moved up to college full time, the same college 'buddies' were able to meet the new students and help them to settle in. The school students enjoyed meeting and being supported by familiar people at college – and the college students enjoyed being helpers.*

Some young people had good experiences of being helped in lessons or activities by other students. Young people told us that they feel more included when they work with someone else. As Case Study 11.3 shows, when young people work as a team, each person can do what they are good at – and help other people with things they find difficult.

**Case Study 11.3 – working together**

*In one school, the students in a learning support unit decided to create an outdoor garden and relaxation area as a social resource for the young people in the unit. Everyone had a part to play. One student, who used a wheelchair, evaluated the height of the new raised planting beds for their accessibility. Another enjoyed the digging, planting and watering tasks and took responsibility for caring for the new seeds, plants and trees. Where work in the project required more specialist skills, other students came in from other parts of the school to act as mentors and guides to the young people in the unit. This kind of collaboration enabled the project to be completed and forged new supportive relationships that extended beyond the life of the project and promoted enhanced interdependence among students around the school.*

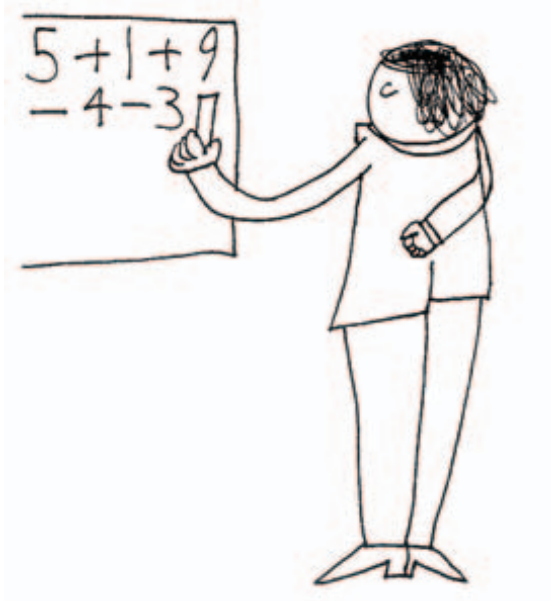
## Support from peers - discussion

The students we met valued peer support and, according to the *Youth Matters* Green Paper (DfES, 2005b), schools and colleges should 'promote peer mentoring'. The use of peer support is advocated in the Government's guidance on bullying affecting young people with special educational needs (DCSF, 2008). Other authors have noted that peer support approaches can lead to reductions in bullying (Naylor and Cowie, 1999) – and that bullying is a key threat to mental health and emotional well-being for young people with learning difficulties (Atkinson and Hornby, 2002; Mencap, 2007). The *Count Us In* report (Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities, 2002) also noted the links between the experience of isolation and marginalisation and the prevalence of mental health and emotional problems (see also Emerson, 2003; Emerson and Hatton, 2007). The 'What about us?' research suggests that young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and special educational needs value the peer support and 'buddying' initiatives that can help to promote precisely these kinds of positive relationships.

### We suggest:

- Schools and colleges should initiate and maintain peer support or 'buddy' schemes that enable young people to support one another.
- Schools and colleges should enable young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs to support one another at times of transition.

## Teaching and learning – key finding 12



**Young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs agreed with staff that it was important to have flexibility in determining curriculum content.**

Both the young people we spoke to and the adults felt very strongly that **what** teachers and tutors teach is crucial. They told us that different young people might need to learn different things. For example, some young people at schools and colleges did well learning ‘mainstream’ subjects (like mathematics, literacy or science) but other young people needed to learn things to help them get more out of life. They needed to learn practical things that would be useful in their future lives – life skills – or they wanted to do activities they were really interested in – like horse riding. Some schools and colleges had life skills courses and some even had life skills units, where all their subjects were taught in ways that meant everyone could join in and learn. Some of these courses offered opportunities to gain qualifications too. Case Study 12.1 illustrates some of the possibilities.

### **Case Study 12.1 – skills for life, students' interests and flexibility**

*One of the schools we visited had a specialist post-16 department, providing alternative study routes for young people with significant learning difficulties. Students transferred to this 'alternative sixth-form' from other mainstream and special schools in the area as one option when they reached the age of 16. 'Skills for life', focusing on learning that was directly relevant to adult life in the community, formed the basis for the curriculum provided.*

*Students at another school valued the wide-ranging 'alternative' options they could pursue in Year 10, when they turned 15. For many of these students, pursuing academic National Curriculum subjects towards GCSE examinations was not appropriate. The alternative options offered by the school – including off-site activities like car maintenance or woodwork or on-site life skills sessions preparing their own lunch in the school's learning support centre – provided them with opportunities to follow their own interests and motivations but also to experience success.*

*In a third school, the learning support unit provided a secure base for students who experienced a range of difficulties with learning. From this base, students could attend mainstream classes on a subject or sessional basis, accessing as many standard National Curriculum lessons around the main school as was thought appropriate. The flexibility of the school's approach also enabled the unit to teach skills for living and independence. The creation of a teaching 'flat', designed to enable students to learn how to look after themselves and their homes, reflected the high profile given to life skills in the unit.*

We heard about lots of other interesting opportunities in the schools and colleges we visited. Instead of the usual subjects, some young people had chances to try out some very different activities – like carpentry, car maintenance or bricklaying. Some schools and colleges worked together to let young people from school try out these things. Young people told us this was really worthwhile and it helped them to decide what they wanted to do next.

Some of the adults told us that there was not enough choice in the timetable for young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs. They thought that the subjects or courses usually offered were not always the best options. Towards the end of pupils' time at school, a lot of teachers were worried that young people could only do GCSE courses. For many of these young people, these courses and qualifications were not the most relevant or appropriate and did not help to meet their individual needs. Many schools did not offer other opportunities. But, as Case Study 12.2 shows, staff in inclusive schools and colleges wanted to be able to devote time to developing and implementing schemes of work and courses focused explicitly on helping young people to prepare for their adult lives and the new options, opportunities, challenges and choices that adulthood brings.

### **Case Study 12.2 – post-16 options**

*The supported learning department in one college of further education enabled some students with learning difficulties (and/or additional needs) to attend mainstream college courses (such as bricklaying, painting and decorating or catering, for example); others followed discrete provision within the department (often with a focus on developing literacy and numeracy skills or skills for life). Students accessed further learning opportunities off-campus via specialist facilities and resource bases in the community (for example, specialist training in horticulture at a nursery or work in the creative arts at a charity project).*

## Teaching and learning – key finding 13

**Young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs agreed with staff that it was important to have flexibility in determining appropriate approaches to teaching and learning.**

Both the young people we spoke to and the adults felt very strongly that **how** teachers and tutors teach is crucial. They told us that different young people might need to be taught in different ways, as Case Study 13.1 suggests.

### **Case Study 13.1 – the community**

*In one school, the learning support unit provided access to the National Curriculum for some students who experienced difficulty engaging with mainstream, classroom-based lessons. The unit made use of the local community as a resource for learning for these students. National Curriculum subjects were taught, using a carefully differentiated approach, through learning that was situated in meaningful 'real life' contexts, emphasising the practical application of skills, knowledge and understanding and the relevance of what was learnt to everyday adult life.*

Young people felt more secure when they could trust the adults to treat them respectfully and show them how to improve their behaviour. In one school, one teacher offered young people some free time or allowed them to choose other activities when they had worked hard. In another school, the young people told us about some teaching they particularly enjoyed in which students were involved in making rules and decisions in their lessons. The young people learnt about taking responsibility for their actions and understanding the consequences when they got things wrong. They also learnt that their efforts could be rewarded, even if they had not been completely successful. They were rewarded for trying hard. Their teachers learnt about being less directive and working in more facilitative, person-centred ways (see Appendix 4).

Some young people told us that other students in school or college were rewarded or acknowledged if they performed well in a few lessons, tests or examinations. Some of the students with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs thought this was unfair, because they behaved well and worked hard a lot of the time but got no recognition. We also heard that some young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs were not sure how to behave with other people or how to deal with people when things went wrong. Some young people got upset when this happened and even got into trouble. The staff felt it was important to help young people learn about the best ways to get on with others.

One of the ways they did this was by treating the young people with respect – and by recognising and acknowledging their achievements. The young people we met wished other people would treat them in similar ways and staff said they wanted to be able to devote time to developing and implementing practices and procedures focused explicitly on helping young people to become more aware of and responsible for their own behaviour, as illustrated in Case Study 13.2.

### **Case Study 13.2 – working as a group**

*In one school, we were intrigued to meet a group of young men, previously identified as being at risk of exclusion because of their disruptive behaviour, who said how much they liked English lessons. Their English lessons, taught in a discrete grouping of around 12 students, were led by an experienced teacher. At the outset, the students 'signed up' to an agreement to comply with agreed standards of respect and behaviour towards each other. The initial sessions focused on this theme, with practical sessions devoted to learning about behaviours such as turn-taking or listening to others. Once this respectful behaviour was established, the focus moved onto the English syllabus. Students were rewarded for their efforts with free time and time spent on preferred activities (such as using the computers). These privileges were removed when appropriate behaviour lapsed. When difficulties of this kind did occur, teaching for the group would revert to a focus on interpersonal skills until positive attitudes towards work and interaction had been re-established.*

*Over time, the behaviour of the students in the group had improved greatly and so had their academic prospects. In the end, every student in the group completed a course of GCSE studies and all but two were entering examinations with expectations of achieving good grades. The young people were very clear that these results were due to the attitudes and approaches they experienced in this English group, including being treated like adults, working as a team, and collaborating with staff to make plans and negotiate outcomes. Working to meet the high expectations of every member of the group was also identified as a key factor – once mutual respect had been established, no-one wanted to let the group down.*

## **Teaching and learning – discussion**

The young people we met during the 'What about us?' project wanted to be more involved in determining the content of the curriculum they experienced. They felt that staff should take account of the views and preferences of students when devising programmes for learning. The Government agrees and proposes that students should 'become more active participants in their education, including planning and evaluation of their own learning' (DfES, 2004c); that provision should be 'tailored to the talents and aspirations of individual young people'; and that schools and colleges should 'combine academic and vocational learning' (DfES, 2005c). Guidance on *Personalising the Curriculum for 14 – 25s with Learning Difficulties* proposes that staff should be 'building on the strengths and interests' of learners during transition and 'using their choices as the basis for planning programmes' (QCA, 2007b). The curriculum should, this guidance argues, 'enable rather than constrain' each individual's transition to adulthood (QCA, 2007b). This approach, it is suggested, will 'prompt change in people's lives' if staff engage young people by 'broadening their horizons and opening up new opportunities' (QCA, 2007b).

The young people also recognised the importance of teaching method. They told us that the way teachers teach can make a big difference – and they wanted to be more involved in negotiating the approaches taken to teaching in their schools and colleges. Governmental guidance takes a similar direction. The White Paper on reform of education for 14 to 19-year olds encourages schools and colleges to explore ‘different styles and paces of learning’ in order to engage young people effectively (DfES, 2005c). There is also evidence that the learning opportunities that young people actually enjoy are likely to lead to more effective learning (DoH and DfES, 2004). Materials published recently as part of the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills focus on ‘involving learners in planning and directing their own learning’ and promoting ‘a person-centred approach to learning’ (DfES, 2006a). Recent guidance aimed at staff working with students with learning difficulties in the 14 to 25 age range, encourages staff to ‘keep the learner at the centre’ (QCA, 2007b). In order to address the ‘personalised learning’ agenda, other guidance encourages teachers to ‘structure and pace the learning experience to make it challenging and enjoyable’ (DfES, 2004a). This approach will be very appropriate for young adults with learning difficulties about to move into an adult life characterised by increased self-determination (DoH, 2001).

#### **We suggest:**

- Schools and colleges making provision for students with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs should have the flexibility to develop and implement alternative curricula and schemes of work, focusing on life skills and the curriculum for resilience, for example.
- Young people should be involved in determining the content of the curriculum.
- Schools and colleges making provision for students with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs should have the flexibility to develop and implement alternative ways of working that help to promote positive social and emotional outcomes including confidence, self-reliance, inter-dependence and resilience.
- Young people should be involved in determining approaches to teaching and learning.

## School and college culture – key finding 14



### Leaders and managers play a crucial role in promoting, maintaining and developing an inclusive culture and ethos in schools and colleges.

The members of staff we spoke to who work directly with young people felt very strongly that what the management team feels about inclusion in their school or college makes a big difference. When managers valued young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs, other staff were encouraged to try to include them successfully. Where managers saw inclusion as very important, young people tended to feel happy and confident that they belonged at their school or college. In these places, the staff felt supported in trying to do their job well. They enjoyed clear opportunities for career advancement within their school or college. They were encouraged to develop new ideas in meeting the needs of young people. They were able to let young people take the lead in developing their individual strengths and interests. As Case Study 14.1 indicates, they were given the time to be creative and the flexibility to work in different ways.

#### **Case Study 14.1 – staff autonomy**

*At one school we visited, there was a strong inclusive ethos that was firmly and explicitly led by the school's senior managers. Members of staff were given the freedom to explore creative ways of providing appropriate teaching content and approaches to learning for students experiencing difficulties. The working commitments of these teaching staff and the time they had to focus on students with special or additional needs were safeguarded with, for example, fewer demands made on them to cover for absent colleagues.*

In some schools and colleges, managers made extra money available to help staff work in better ways. For example, some schools or colleges set up special groups or had smaller classes. Some schools or colleges ran alternative courses or curriculum options to meet the individual needs of young people more appropriately. These practices often cost more than regular ways of working, but had better results – both in terms of young people's confidence and their improved skills. We saw some extremely successful examples of these different ways of working



and young people were very positive about their experiences in these settings. Young people feel much better about themselves when adults get things right. Staff felt that it was important that there was a clear message from managers to other staff about the need to include everyone properly. Staff told us that the message needed to say that it was the responsibility of all staff to do this, not just those who had particular job titles or who ran special courses. They felt that this message had to come from the managers as well as the staff who worked in classrooms. Case Study 14.2 shows how things can go wrong when this does not happen.

#### **Case Study 14.2 – barriers in college**

*The complex nature of funding and staffing structures in colleges of further education can create many potential barriers to effective inclusion for students with learning difficulties. For example, the supported learning department in one college we visited was staffed by a large number of hourly-paid, part-time tutors and support staff without permanent contracts. Often, these individuals would not be informed of their teaching allocation, or even whether their contract would be renewed, before the September of the academic year in which they were to start work. Staff were frequently deployed to new courses and had to develop new subject skills and resources as a short-term response to new challenges. Staff were frustrated by not being able to plan for progression and continuity in their courses from year to year.*

*For students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities or additional needs, these discontinuities were deeply unhelpful and counter-inclusive. Essential transition planning was often impossible because staff were unable to confirm the sustainability of courses or personnel. Individual members of staff we met knew that familiar people and consistency of approach were key factors in ensuring success for some students and that effective support for transitions was a crucial element in the lives of many young people with learning difficulties. However, because of staffing and course uncertainties, staff found it very difficult to support students appropriately in any transitions – from one year to the next; from one course to another; or from college into adult life.*

Members of staff need ways of influencing managers directly so that schools and colleges can sustain a focus on developing more inclusive practices. As we have seen in the ‘What about us?’ project, managers also need to listen to young people – including young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs. As Case Study 14.3 shows, young people can help managers to understand schools and colleges from the students’ points of view and have the capacity to become effective agents for positive change.

#### **Case Study 14.3 – college managers**

*The head of the learning support department in one college associated with the ‘What about us?’ project acted as a member of the senior management team in the college. She used her position to ensure that inclusion and appropriate provision for students with learning difficulties were given a high profile in the life of the college on an ongoing basis. Both staff and students felt that they had ‘a voice’ within this college and acknowledged the management’s commitment to inclusion. On one occasion, for example, students wrote to the college principal to point out that the new wheelchair access ramp into the restaurant was too steep to be independently accessible to people using wheelchairs. College managers responded quickly by installing a lift as an alternative.*

## School and college culture – key finding 15

### Schools and colleges are committed to doing the best for the young people they teach.

The schools and colleges we visited are strongly committed to the policy of making inclusion work. As Case Studies 15.1, 15.2 and 15.3 show this often means that they do things in different or unusual ways. They may have management policies that challenge accepted views about institutional development. Staff in these schools and colleges certainly put a great deal of energy and personal commitment into their work.

#### **Case Study 15.1 – inclusive college**

*To ensure consistency in the learning support department, one college employed a small number of staff on long-term contracts over much of the teaching week. It was felt that this policy would enable the college to include, teach and support those students with learning disabilities most effectively. This practice was not common across the college, but was a direct consequence of the commitment of the college principal and the head of department's insistence on adhering to professional principles of good practice in supporting these learners. The value of this consistent staffing was strongly acknowledged by the young people themselves, both at the college and by those on link placements from feeder schools. It clearly had a very positive impact upon their sense of stability and security in the turbulent environment of a busy sector college.*

#### **Case Study 15.2 – inclusive school**

*One school we visited made provision for an unusually high proportion of students with special and additional needs and Statements, some of whom had been excluded from other schools or had returned to local authority provision from out-of-county specialist placements. The members of the management team in this school demonstrated their clear commitment to inclusion by adopting a flexible, learner-centred approach in order to provide a personalised education for all learners. This ethos, focused on effective support for the individual learner and engagement with families and the local community, had its origins among the school's managers but also pervaded the work of the whole school and could be observed to be embedded in the day-to-day working practices of staff.*

*The staff profile in this school was unusual. The school's senior managers had worked there for many years. They knew the young people, and their brothers, sisters, parents and members of their extended families, well. They were leading figures in the local community and ensured that the school was extensively used for community functions. They aimed to retain teaching staff over the long term, pursuing a concerted policy of internal promotion in order to reward excellence and promote loyalty. Senior managers at the school argued that this approach ensured stability within the structure of the school and helped to maintain, on a consistent basis, the school's values and ethos.*

*Flexibility and creativity were two key factors in sustaining the school's ongoing and developing inclusivity. Members of school staff adopted a positive, 'can do' approach rather than focusing on problems. They were constantly open to (and supported in implementing and developing) new ways of working. They were innovators who would change what they did in order to respond to the needs of students. Their focus was upon each young person rather than school systems. The school continually invested in inclusion both financially and through the ongoing reinvention and refinement of practice.*

**Case Study 15.3 – staff commitment**

*In one college, the commitment and adaptability of staff in the learning support department were very powerful, creating a valuable resource for the college and an important source of support and stability for the students. We saw ongoing evidence of the ways in which they invested their own time and energy in order to support their students. We heard from parents and young people about involvement in extra-curricular activities led by staff in their own time. Several of the young people had taken part in an art exhibition in London, for example, because a tutor gave up her own time and effort. The students all really valued these opportunities. However, we became increasingly aware of the frustrations felt by staff as they were constantly faced with many obstacles in accessing the best provision for their students. Opportunities often seemed to be gained in spite of the difficulties thrown up by the system rather than being promoted as an integral part of the college's core business.*

Everyone involved in this project was very generous in giving their time and efforts. In order to acknowledge this commitment, the 'What about us?' project gave each school and college a small amount of money to help them with the project work. The schools and colleges used their money in different and creative ways to make things better for their young people. The adults we met helped to make sure that the young people took part and that their action research projects were a great success. These projects led to some exciting and unexpected changes and improvements. But these things would not have happened without the crucial and valuable involvement of all the young people who worked with us. We could not have done the 'What about us?' project without these young people – or the staff who supported them and us.

## School and college culture - discussion

It is clear that managers have a key role to play in nurturing an inclusive ethos in their schools and colleges. Guidance would suggest that involving young people can, in turn, help to promote the development of, 'a more inclusive environment' (DfES, 2004c). We would therefore argue that managers can use the approaches employed during the 'What about us?' project to help operationalise inclusive principles and policies in their own schools and colleges.

Action research can help schools and colleges work with the Government to 'embed participation in all our activities' (Twigg, 2004). The Government has emphasised citizenship in the curriculum; Ofsted inspectors now consult with pupils and summarise pupil views in inspection reports; the Government has changed the law to enable school governing bodies to appoint pupils as associate members and to invite them to serve on committees (DfES, 2004c). We recognise that schools and colleges are, in general, committed to doing the best they can for the young people they teach. We commend the outcomes of the 'What about us?' project, summarised in the next and final section, to staff and managers in schools and colleges and propose that these findings can help schools and colleges to implement progressive policies and practices and to improve their responses to young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and special educational needs.

### We suggest:

- Leaders and managers should focus on developing approaches to leadership and management that promote inclusion at all levels.
- Leaders and managers should be confident that inclusive schools and colleges can effectively meet the needs of all learners, families and colleagues.
- All schools and colleges should work to involve young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs more fully in all aspects of school or college life.

## Closing comments

In the next and final section of this report, we summarise the key issues emerging from the 'What about us?' research and develop a focused series of recommendations for enhancing the social and emotional well-being of young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs in inclusive schools and colleges.

# Chapter 5

## Conclusions and implications for policy and practice



## Introduction

In many respects, the practices we saw in schools and colleges during the 'What about us?' project were different from those we expected. We thought that schools and colleges would be making more use of strategies like peer support, buddy systems or circles of support, augmentative or alternative approaches to communication and personalised approaches including person-centred transition or review processes. However, we did learn a great deal about what is important for young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs in inclusive secondary schools and colleges – and our conclusions reflect these priorities. The young people showed us how they feel more confident and secure when conditions are right. They also showed us how things can be better for them at school and college – and how they can contribute significantly to improvement processes at a range of levels.

The Reference Group of young people who supported the 'What about us?' project contributed more significantly to the project than we anticipated. The members of the group helped to conceptualise the research for us in terms that were accessible and meaningful to young people. They helped to develop research tools and a pack of ideas to support the involvement of other young people in research activity. They ran and managed their own meetings and, on their own initiative, entered into live and constructive dialogue with the project's Advisory Committee of professionals. They contributed significantly to the development of the project's outputs, both in terms of content and form and style of presentation. We think that all participative research projects should take account of the positive contribution made by the 'What about us?' Reference Group of young people and carefully consider the role that representatives from user groups could have in their research (see Lewis, Parsons, Robertson, Feiler, Tarleton, Watson, Byers, Davies, Fergusson and Marvin, 2008).

In relation to the development of more inclusive responses in mainstream schools and colleges, and the promotion of social and emotional well-being and a sense of belonging for young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs, we would make the following recommendations on the basis of the findings from the 'What about us?' project.

## Research and development

We found that involving young people in the processes of action research and institutional development can, in itself, promote enhanced social and emotional well-being and the development of important new skills, attitudes and understandings. Young people feel better, and learn more, when they do research. Further, young people can make significant contributions to school and college evaluation, improvement and development processes by doing action research. The outcomes from the 'What about us?' project demonstrate that young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs can work very effectively as researchers and as the leaders and initiators of research if they are given the opportunity.

In addition, these young people have powerful new ideas about school and college development – and raise issues that are different from those raised by staff or policy makers. In the ‘What about us?’ project, we concluded that insights from learners are powerful, original and important. We found that young people can provide high-quality and innovative proposals for improvements in provision on a range of levels and that, when staff and policy makers take the time to listen, young people can make a positive and effective contribution to development in schools and colleges. Young people have views and perspectives that can make a real difference – they should drive developments more widely in schools and colleges.

### **Policy makers and managers should:**

- use the procedures and outcomes of the ‘What about us?’ project to promote the active involvement of young people in research and development projects in their own settings;
- initiate ongoing cycles of participative action research as a key strategy for promoting social and emotional well-being, inclusion and school and college improvement;
- ensure that school and college staff receive training in action research methods and the participation of young people.

### **Staff in schools and colleges should:**

- enable young people to initiate, plan, develop and carry out research activity focused on their own interests and concerns;
- involve young people actively in research and development projects, supporting them and working alongside them;
- initiate and sustain cycles of participative action research in order to promote personal and social development and important new transferable skills for young people.

### **This will enable young people to:**

- feel better about themselves;
- feel more included;
- gain important new skills;
- identify issues that they wish to explore and problems they wish to resolve;
- put forward their ideas for school and college development;
- carry out their own research and development projects;
- contribute to school and college development and improvement processes;
- see how their views and ideas drive improvements in school and college life.



## Feeling safe and secure

Young people are concerned with the quality of their experiences across the whole of the school or college day – and particularly outside of formal lesson times. The ‘extra curricular’ parts of the day can be particularly stressful for young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs. For them, the whole day is important and they want to feel safe and happy all the time – not just in lessons. The young people told us that they like to have designated ‘safe places’, sources of support or supervised activities that they can access during stressful parts of the school or college day. They suggested that schools and colleges should provide them, and other students who do not feel safe, with ways of seeking respite from the challenges of the mainstream environment, finding support and enjoying the society of young people like themselves – especially at lunchtimes, break times and during study or social periods in between taught lessons.

The schools and colleges involved with the project accepted that sometimes inclusion can entail the use of separate provision and specialist approaches. They proposed that the focused, practical responses they made represented realistic ways of thinking about and implementing inclusion – particularly with regard to the social and emotional well-being of young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs.

### Policy makers and managers should:

- ensure that policies and practices foster the social and emotional well-being of young people across an extended school or college day, including lunchtimes, breaks, transit times and during extra-curricular activity;
- provide staffing to support students between taught sessions and during break times and lunchtimes;
- provide optional guided support, such as activities or designated areas for young people to use during break times, lunchtimes and study periods;
- lead the development of more flexible and permissive interpretations of inclusion that acknowledge the value of separate and specialist provision.



**Staff in schools and colleges should:**

- be available to young people, at designated locations, so that young people can ask for support if and when they need it at any time during the school or college day;
- sustain practices that support students through the non-teaching parts of the school or college day – including the provision of peer support.

**This will enable young people to:**

- have higher quality experiences across the whole of the extended school or college day;
- feel safe, secure and supported when moving between taught sessions, at break times and during lunchtimes;
- relax and spend social time with other young people out of lessons;
- engage in structured or supervised activities, if they choose, during non-teaching parts of the school or college day.

## Communication and representation

Our work during the 'What about us?' project revealed that school, college and student councils (along with other processes for consultation and developing school or college democracy) frequently do not include young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs. These processes, if they play an active part in school or college life at all, tend to privilege those young people who are already 'high achievers' or who are the most popular among their peers. We found that young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs can make effective contributions – yet they are often excluded from consultation, planning and decision-making processes. The young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs we met felt that this was unfair and said that they wanted to be more actively involved in these processes at an institutional level.

In the 'What about us?' project, we found that barriers to student voice and advocacy often exist in schools and colleges. Young people can experience barriers to communication and difficulties in expressing their views and ideas about life in school and college. In particular, it is not always easy for young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs to get their voices heard – even though opportunities to express their views will have direct positive benefits for young people in terms of their social development and their emotional well-being.

This situation is exacerbated because young people often find that information in schools and colleges is difficult to understand – and being excluded from opportunities to communicate leads to young people feeling devalued, unwanted and isolated. In the 'What about us?' project, we found that schools and colleges often present information (including materials needed for teaching and learning) in formats that are not accessible for young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs. There is too much reliance on talk and words on pieces of paper and not enough use of established ways of augmenting or providing alternative ways of communicating such as signs, symbols, pictures, objects or information and communication technologies.

### Policy makers and managers should:

- review the role of student councils and the ways in which decision-making processes operate;
- create, use and nurture structures that enable all young people to participate in democratic, consultative and decision-making activities;
- engage local advocacy groups to help develop ways of working that ensure that school and college councils become more inclusive;
- ensure that all young people are actively, regularly and routinely consulted about their educational experiences and their views about life in schools or college;
- provide staff training focused on augmentative and alternative approaches to communication;
- ensure that means of augmentative or providing alternatives to spoken language, reading and writing (for example, through signs, symbols, pictures, objects or information and communication technologies) are made available as a routine aspect of policy and practice in relation to accessible communication.

**Staff in schools and colleges should:**

- offer support for advocacy and representation;
- promote ways of ensuring that all young people, including those with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs, have access to student council processes and are actively involved in consultative and decision-making structures;
- provide regular and frequent opportunities for young people to express their views and opinions and make choices;
- consult young people directly and regularly;
- ensure that information is accessible to all young people, whatever their personal preferences in terms of modes of expression;
- ensure that communication is personalised to meet the needs of all young people;
- ensure that the communication environment of the school or college supports access to information for all young people.

**This will enable young people to:**

- make a full contribution to school and college development and improvement;
- make full use of opportunities to be supported in their advocacy;
- express their own ideas and views – including their reflections about school or college life;
- speak out for themselves on issues that concern them;
- contribute to debates and negotiations about school or college development;
- access and make use of information that is provided in lessons and in relation to other school or college matters;
- participate actively in the flow and exchange of information that is at the heart of school and college life.

## **Transition and personalisation**

Young people also told us that they want to be more centrally involved in the planning and decision-making processes that affect them as individuals – particularly when those plans concern major changes in their lives like school–college transitions and exit pathways from college. Understandably, young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs want to know all they can about the major changes in their lives such as moving to a different school or college – and to be fully involved in making the plans that initiate these changes.

### **Policy makers and managers should:**

- promote the active involvement of young people in developing plans for transitions between settings and into post-school and post-college opportunities;
- provide training for staff in facilitating person-centred approaches.

### **Staff in schools and colleges should:**

- work directly with young people to promote participation in planning and more person-centred ways of working;
- involve young people in making person-centred plans on a regular and routine basis and particularly when planning for significant changes in their lives.

### **This will enable young people to:**

- be actively involved in planning for changes in their lives;
- take a lead in managing and directing change processes;
- have first hand experience of the options on offer at points of transition so they can make informed choices;
- support one another at and through times of transition.

## Support from peers

Sources of support are crucial to young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs who are included in mainstream schools and colleges. These young people value support from members of staff – but having a buddy who is a fellow student can be a big help and bring its own benefits. Approaches that make use of peer support are both effective and inclusive. In the ‘What about us?’ project, we found that schools and colleges did not promote this kind of support as effectively as they might. Young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs welcome support from peers and regard schemes that promote support between students as especially valuable.

### Policy makers and managers should:

- promote the use of peers as an effective, efficient and inclusive strategy for optimising support;
- provide staff training in peer support and group work.

### Staff in schools and colleges should:

- initiate, facilitate and maintain peer support or buddy schemes;
- promote opportunities for young people to support one another regularly in lessons and through the whole school or college day;
- ensure, in particular, that young people support one another at times of change and transition.

### This will enable young people to:

- support one another in lessons and in other aspects of the school or college day;
- help one another to prepare for changes in their lives;
- support one another during times of change and transition.

## Teaching and learning

The young people and members of staff we met agreed that what teachers and tutors teach is important. They argued that the curriculum in inclusive schools and colleges must be flexible and responsive – so that curriculum content can be tailored to meet the needs of young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs. It is important, therefore, for staff to have flexibility in determining curriculum content – and to negotiate content with learners.

The young people we met during the ‘What about us?’ project also agreed with their teachers and tutors that how teachers and tutors teach is important. Teaching methods in inclusive schools and colleges must be carefully planned in order to ensure that teaching is responsive to the needs and preferences of students. Staff need flexibility in determining appropriate and imaginative approaches to teaching and learning when they are working with young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs. They need to learn to become more facilitative and less directive and they need to negotiate methods with learners.

### Policy makers and managers should:

- encourage staff to explore and exploit the flexibilities that exist in relation to the curriculum in schools and colleges;
- ensure that staff develop and implement alternative programmes of study and schemes of work;
- enable young people to be involved in determining the content of the curriculum;
- offer staff the flexibility to explore alternative approaches to teaching and learning and develop and implement alternative ways of working;
- support staff in developing a more extensive repertoire of approaches to teaching and learning;
- make sure young people are involved in determining approaches to teaching and learning.

### Staff in schools and colleges should:

- pursue innovative approaches to curriculum design;
- develop programmes of study and schemes of work focused on young people’s personal and social development, for example, on life skills, emotional development and the curriculum for resilience;
- take more account of the needs and preferences of young people when developing the content of these learning opportunities;
- develop and implement teaching approaches that help to promote positive social and emotional outcomes for young people, including confidence, self-reliance, inter-dependence and resilience;
- work with young people to develop improved approaches to teaching and learning that promote greater student involvement and autonomy.

**This will enable young people to:**

- be involved in determining the content of the curriculum;
- benefit from teaching that is explicitly focused on their personal, social and emotional development;
- be involved in determining improved approaches to teaching and learning;
- learn in contexts in which they can take a leading role and develop greater autonomy and independence;
- benefit from teaching methods that help to promote their personal, social and emotional development.

## School and college culture

We confirmed that leaders and managers, in partnership with staff, students and parents, play a crucial role in promoting, maintaining and developing an inclusive culture and ethos in schools and colleges. What managers think and the ways in which they choose to work, can have a major impact upon the experiences of young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs. For example, there is often lack of continuity in college-based provision because of uncertainties over funding. At the same time, we confirmed that schools and colleges that strive to become more inclusive are committed to doing the best they can for the young people they teach – they want to help all young people, including those who experience learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs.

### Policy makers and managers should:

- focus on developing approaches to leadership and management that promote inclusion at all levels;
- be confident that inclusive schools and colleges can effectively meet the needs of all learners, families and colleagues;
- foster continuity of staffing for young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs;
- work to involve more young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs more fully in all aspects of school or college life;
- strive to promote inclusion at all levels in their schools and colleges.

### Staff in schools and colleges should:

- welcome students with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs into their lessons;
- develop more facilitative and person-centred ways of working with young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or special educational needs;
- collaborate more effectively with fellow professionals, family members and young people;
- work to involve their students more actively in more aspects of school or college life.

### This will enable young people to:

- feel included;
- feel they belong;
- feel better about themselves;
- gain the skills, insights, attitudes, understandings and experiences they will need in their adult lives.



## Closing remarks

The changes we saw during the 'What about us?' project were impressive and persuasive. We hope that many schools and colleges will now want to build on our experiences and initiate change and development processes of their own based on the participation of young people in action research. We would like to thank the managers and staff in the local authorities, schools and colleges in which we worked during the 'What about us?' project and the members of our Advisory Committee and other networks for consultation. Their support and participation was invaluable. We are also, however, very clear that the changes we witnessed depended most significantly upon the involvement of the young people who worked with the project – in the participating schools and colleges and in the project's Reference Group. The 'What about us?' project could not have achieved what it did without these young people. We hope we left them with a very clear message about the scale of their achievements. In conclusion, we agree, with Kincheloe and Steinberg (1998), that activities that 'cultivate students as researchers' can help to push us 'beyond the boundaries of what we thought was possible'.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1

### **Membership of the 'What about us?' Reference Group (in association with Speaking Up! in Cambridge)**

Sean Anderson, Mark Chapman-Cole, Amy Forgacs, John Hutchison, Tracey Odeyemi, Ryan Soder and John Woodhouse.

Supported by: Faye Birkin, Alison Gelder, Stephanie Hawryla and Grace Pelling.

### **Membership of the 'What about us?' Advisory Committee**

Chair: Professor Klaus Wedell

Sally Faraday, Learning and Skills Network

Helen Hayhoe, Richmond-upon-Thames College

James Hourigan, head of learning support for the London Borough of Newham

Professor Ann Lewis, School of Education at the University of Birmingham

Esme Russell, formerly representing Mencap

Chih Hoong Sing, Disability Rights Commission for the duration of this research, but now at the Office for Public Management

Liam Ward, manager of learning disabilities children's services in Essex

Observer: Jacqui Shurlock of the Department for Education and Skills.

## Appendix 2

### Criteria for the selection of the 'What about us?' case study sites

The following bullet points summarise the criteria established for the selection and involvement of those schools and colleges wishing to work with the 'What about us?' project as case study sites:

- Each school or college would need to identify at least four young people with learning difficulties to participate in the research. The project was particularly keen to work with young people preparing for the process of transition, for example, from school to college, or who were involved in other transition-related activities.
- Each institution would need to name a link member of staff and show how they would involve young people with learning difficulties in the project as co-researchers.
- Case study sites would preferably be able to identify some family members who might be invited to participate in the research.
- Sites that already had a school or college council, advocacy group or similar body would be regarded as demonstrating prior commitment to the involvement of young people in institutional development.
- Clusters of case study sites would need to show that they had close working links with other agencies.
- Clusters of case study sites would need to show that they were already adopting, or intending to adopt, or willing to explore and develop imaginative approaches to inclusion through the curriculum, teaching and learning processes, social and extra-curricular activities, pastoral care and planning for transitions.
- Each cluster of case study sites would need to identify one co-ordinator to liaise directly with the research team.
- Case study sites that already engaged in active networking activities, preferably including co-operation with residential or day special schools or specialist colleges, would be regarded as demonstrating prior commitment to useful processes of productive collaboration.

The project team did not expect every school or college to demonstrate all the above characteristics as established elements of practice. The project expected to engage with clusters of sites where there were some established examples of these ways of working and a willingness to share, consolidate and further develop best practice.

## Appendix 3

### The 'What about us?' code of conduct

This project will involve staff and students in schools and colleges as partners in research with members of the Research Team. Family members, peers, advocates, circles of support members and other professionals will also be invited to take part. The project will follow guidelines from organisations such as the British Educational Research Association about how projects should be carried out. These are our promises to you.

- We will discuss the project with you before you decide if you want to take part.
- You can have a less active part or drop out of the project at any time.
- We will listen to, respect and value your views at every stage of the project.
- We want to keep you safe, so we will not use your name in any of the things we write about even if we name your school or college.
- We will make sure that you have permission from others to do the project - for example, to make notes of interviews, take photographs, make videos and tape recordings.
- We will ask for your permission if we want to publish examples of what you have done.
- We will make sure that you are happy with the way we show any ideas or information you collect in anything we publish.
- We will make sure that images (photos or video clips for example) are positive and that people are comfortable with the pictures and their use. No images will be used without permission.
- We will regularly report about the project to members of the Reference Group, the Advisory Committee and the Centre for Participation. They will check we follow guidelines about how projects are carried out.
- We will regularly meet with you and help you with the project.
- We will tell you who to talk to if you have any problems with the project or with life at school or college.



## **Appendix 4**

### **An introduction to person-centred planning**

Person-centred planning provides a way of planning all aspects of a person's life. It is often used with adults with learning disabilities. The person is at the centre of the planning process and, with support, decides who they would like to help them and who can help them make the plans possible. This approach is particularly useful during periods of transition because it gives young people a chance to say what they want for their future.

The purpose of person-centred planning is to give the person a platform to have a meaningful dialogue with people they know and care about to help them think about what they want from their life, now and in the future. This is coupled with action that helps the person make their own decisions and have more control over their life. There are a number of ways in which you can develop a person-centred plan and there are numerous tools to support people to think about what a 'positive' future will look like and the steps to making it happen – most of these follow a list of key questions:

#### **Who are the important people in their lives?**

These are the people the person wants to be part of developing their person-centred plan and who can help them make things happen. These are the committed people in the person's life who know and care about them.

#### **What are the person's gifts?**

Finding out what the person is really good at and what people like about the person can help people think about the kinds of employment, educational courses, career paths, activities or future housing options the person may wish to pursue.

#### **What is important to the person now and in the future?**

This helps people think about what is important to them, and what they want from others to make sure those important things stay the same. It may also highlight what the person is not getting so that plans can be made to ensure things start to happen in the future. Learning about what is important to people can also help others to understand the person's preferences.

#### **What are the supports the person may need to make things happen to get the future they want?**

The learning from this will help people to identify key areas in which support is needed. Family members in particular find this useful as it means the conversations can explore ways to overcome obstacles. For example, if a person finds changes in an established routine hard to accept, this can be written into a detailed plan to be followed by all the people supporting the person.

#### **What do we need to do?**

This is also called 'action planning'. This is a way to ensure that those things the person wants to happen, to make a positive future, actually happen. This would include identifying the people who are responsible for implementing the plan with the person.

### Words of caution:

- A person-centred plan is not the outcome, it is an ongoing process.
- A person-centred plan is not sufficient to change a person's life but provides a focus for direction.
- It is not a person-centred plan unless action is taken and evidence is gathered to support any change to the person's life (based on the information gathered).
- People need someone who is committed to making sure that the plan is ongoing.

There are various person-centred planning tools to help you get started. Remember, person-centred planning is not done in isolation.

Valuing People (the English Government's action plan for improving the lives of people with learning disabilities and their families) offers the following guidance to support person-centred planning:

- The person is at the centre (involved in the entire process).
- The person and those that know and care about them are involved as partners in planning. This includes family and friends.
- The plan identifies what is important to the person now and for their future. It shows what they are good at and what support they will need to make things happen.
- The plan shows how to support the person to be part of their community and helps the community to welcome them, taking into consideration what support the person needs to be healthy and safe.
- The plan is put into action to help the person achieve the things they want for their future. People keep on listening, learning and making things happen.

Many schools in England are adopting the 'person-centred review' process, adapted from the 'essential lifestyle planning' process (Smull and Sanderson, 2005). The outcome is for the young person to have a greater involvement in their transition review and to be at the centre of developing a plan for their transition from school to adulthood. For further information go to: [www.valuingpeople.gov.uk](http://www.valuingpeople.gov.uk).

### Reference:

Smull, M. W. and Sanderson, H. (2005) *Essential Lifestyle Planning for Everyone*. Stockport: The Learning Community.



## About the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities

We promote the rights, quality of life and opportunities of people with learning disabilities and their families. We do this by working with people with learning disabilities, their families and those who support them to:

- do research and develop projects that promote social inclusion and citizenship
- support local communities and services to include people with learning disabilities
- make practical improvements in services for people with learning disabilities
- spread knowledge and information

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