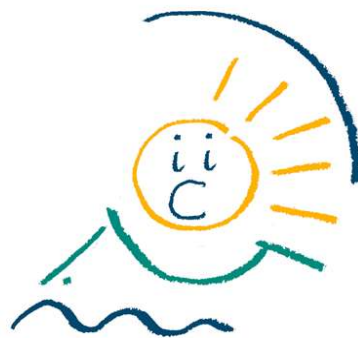


TIME NO LONGER.

A contribution to the debate around
leaving care.

TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD,
POST 16, GLENDENE SCHOOL.

This report is an evaluation of the work of
Investing in
Children, students and staff at Glendene
school in the
post 16 age group. It is based on an ongoing
process
of dialogue over 8 months.



investing in children

June 2004

Process

In October 2003 we began the project that was to concentrate on post 16 provision for young people with learning disabilities. We found that for some of the young people communication difficulties were profound, but in others, skills were well developed. We began by trying to become a part of the circle of support for the young people. We spent time becoming friends, establishing interests and learning how to communicate with one another. We talked about family, hobbies, books and current affairs; the purpose of this was to give the young people a chance to get to know us.

It has been an exercise of learning and we have found that young people with disabilities communicate meaningfully. However, developing this dialogue takes a great deal of time including a period of establishing trust and confidence building.

Over time they began to indicate preferences, needs and wishes. We introduced peer mentors approximately the same age to enhance communication. This was based on a project in greater Manchester GMCDP which had been designed using an idea from young disabled people who found that working together on common issues, learning from each other and sharing experiences could reduce barriers and help them each make sense of their situations.

This was valuable for both partners; the young people from St. Leonard's found that the experience had had a profound effect on their outlook.

We have informally discussed a range of issues but have learned that we need a focus and a facilitator in order that the group can structure thoughts and articulate ideas. Repetition is helpful in that it enables the young people to add new concepts or ideas to recently considered issues.

Aspirations, dreams and the importance of friends have been an important focus during our interactions. The young people enjoy music and drama and we have used this as a tool for confidence building. Together we have visited the theatre and shared drama and debate to collate ideas. Theatre trips enabled us to structure interactions. We planned together, voting, deciding, we supported one another during transport; we ate together and then later used the experience to extend literature projects and also as a part of the ASDAN drama and

performing arts in school. The young people almost all express a wish to perform and be on stage.

When seeking views of the young people we sit in a circle and take turns listening to one another. Usually an adult acts as a facilitator, and this is the young people's preference. They like to have an adult who knows them around; they seek clarification and confirmation, usually from myself, Mary or Mrs Bowman the class teacher. They are always keen to please. They can recall and recount our experiences and enjoy doing so. The young persons who cannot articulate well nominate a friend to speak for them. This can be amazing to watch and be a part of - but it only happens at school where the art is well established. It is a very effective means of communication; delight or displeasure confirms or denies responses.

Finding out about feelings is a slow process with these young people, although they readily express pain, pleasure, anxiety and joy. These emotions are linked to visible concepts. They are not inhibited in forms of expression, they are tactile, responsive and socially well adapted, but it is very hard for them to visualise change or the future.

It appears from their responses that some of the adults in their lives are less flexible about the future; are possibly reluctant to take risks and are afraid of the consequences of change. We had to base our work with the young people around the school day otherwise too many problems emerged- transport, medication, inflexible routines.

We learned about vulnerability and real choice. There are not many options for these young people, even if parents or carers are willing to take risks. It appears that Glendene is a feeder school for the Shinwell centre and the future of that is not certain.

They could benefit from more hands on activities; the glass painting work they do is a small industry. Learning through hands on activities such as art, music pottery gives satisfaction. If they were able to work in an art gallery or museum the general ambience would encourage and inspire them. These young people are sensitive to the environment in which they are placed. They all responded very positively to the theatre environment, museums and galleries now have rooms set aside for the use of students.

More drama and music might enable the young people to act out fears about leaving school and other issues in a more direct and personal manner.

If education is a preparation for the full richness of life, in which language and number are centrally important, so too are the arts. A step forward for these young people might be a drama based approach to exploring life skills widening experience through the arts. This approach would blend well with interagency working and demonstrate the ever-open classroom.

Researchers suggest that effective practice is not possible without partnership and therefore it is unacceptable for agencies to work in isolation. Why then have we reached a situation where school leavers from Glendene have no real choice. Does this demonstrate collaboration between health, education, social services and other agencies. Or does it demonstrate that we did not plan and we did not work together at all?

The government and legislation could be identified as the key, but equally the challenge facing all of us is to overcome these problems of gaps in provision and take steps to improve.

Providing a wider range of learning activities especially between the ages of 16-19 would help these young adults develop self confidence, also extending educational opportunities until they are ready to leave is innovative it expands provision.

Learning From the Process

The key conclusions can be highlighted as follows:

1 We were successful in that we did create opportunities for young people to take part in dialogue and have a chance to construct their own agenda.

2 We have learned a great deal about our own practice and the way we work with young people, particularly the value of peer mentors for this client group.

3 We gained an understanding of the issues that concern this group but worry how much further we can move this on. We have generated new questions and problems that require further debate and analysis.

4 The process of working over time has led to a collection of experiences and thoughts that could not have been gained in any other way. We have become a part of their world and they ours, and we have all thought about issues which may not have come into view without this interaction.

The Issues Identified by the Young People

Finding out what they might like to do when they leave school is easier than enabling that to happen. Mostly they know what they would like and they will tell you themselves, quietly, with encouragement. Some of their aspirations include being a policeman, working in a garage, selling pies at Asda, working in the stadium of light and singing with Buddie Holly. The list is endless, but who can make it happen?

Could they have 1:1 job coaching, additional placements, supported work part time?

Could they have stronger links with welfare to work?

All of the young people rely on and value the friendship of each other. Socialisation is very important to them they all express a strong desire to remain friends and keep in touch once they have left school. They do not want to be lonely or without friends. They express a wish to have parties and reunions together. It is clear that school life is a hugely important part of their world, here they have all of these needs met. They are encouraged to be independent and to support one another. The concept of integration is seen in action, and the young people do interact with their environment. They would like school to be a drop in centre a continuing source of support, a place for advice and company.

Widening access to learning is a matter of high importance; the challenge is to provide people with the type of learning they want at a time and place that suits them. One of the main motivations of Glendene pupils is to mix with people; they enjoy the content and the interactive style of school.

Conclusions

Glendene is successful in engaging and motivating learners and is effective in developing social and basic skills. Why does it stop if there is no better alternative in existence?

Should there be a less arbitrary leaving age? Like young people in the wider community leaving should be decided by

the individual's readiness to leave as well as the existence of a better alternative.

The project, transition to adulthood was conducted with a relaxed approach - enabling young people develop ideas at their own pace. We tried not to approach them with false pretences, we did not promise solutions.

We found a whole range of immediate personal health and social problems, more urgent than the problem of leaving care; these young people face problems every day. This should have implications for the type of support and choices available to them. A very consistent and dependable form of support is that given by schools and has been so from age 4 to 18. The children rely on a structured day, continuity and support. They cannot imagine a life without school; we should have tried to prepare them earlier.

Are we prepared to take their career aspirations seriously?

Has anyone talked to the police/stadium of light/Asda or local garages about employment opportunities for young people with learning disabilities?

The findings in this report indicate that the world of drama is an appropriate and effective form of therapy for our young people who demonstrate their understanding and aptitude for the dramatic and cathartic.

Who will harness this potential, kinetic energy?

How do we enable them to remain friends?

Can we facilitate a social centre linked to school that provides continuity: warmth, understanding and help – for as long as they want it and need it?

Which way now?

The principal joy of the work came from the children and young people in Glendene and their peer mentors. Their insights helped us to see how things look to them and we admire their cheerfulness and resilience.

Looking after them would be easier and much more effective if we really heard and understood what they have to tell us.

Part of the green paper agenda is that schools can become extended schools acting as the hub for services for children going beyond their core educational function.

Could this not be the case for these young people, until they feel ready to leave?

Patricia Abbott
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This report is dedicated to the smile of Stuart Richardson and to his dreams, realised and otherwise. Stuart died on June 25th 2004. His memory lives on.