

Access to education and employment

Notes from the second seminar on 2nd Feb 2006

The notes from seminar 2 are organised below following the headings from seminar 1.

1. What do we mean by access?

- Bridging a gap e.g. between wanting to work and being able to work
- We can distinguish between genuine access and tokenistic access e.g. access to meaningless occupation or subsidised wages instead of real (supported) employment or sniffing a sandal as part of the history curriculum!
- Accessing new things often involves risk for the person with learning disabilities. People want to take risks but professionals are cautious and the climate is currently fearful around risk (connected with being sued).

2. What do people with learning difficulties want access to?

Dee Molina reported on some of the things the people City Limits support want:

- Authentic experience e.g. work-based learning, real jobs.
- Jobs that match their skills and interest – not just any job
- A chance to move on at work – to progress.
- Information about why things happen in their lives
- Choices about their lives

3. What makes people with learning difficulties angry or frustrated?

- People's school experiences often led to anger – where there was a lack of communication and listening by staff especially.
- We were all angered by Jackie's frustration at not getting the quality of independent living any of us would expect as a minimum.
- False starts – getting work experience or starting jobs that never became real or sustained for more than a few weeks. Jeremy's experience of a job coming to an end and not knowing why.
- It's difficult to get paid work: Darren, Drew, Wayne and Robin shared how they value paid work because it means they have their own money

which gives them some independence and choices. But they also shared how it is was difficult to get paid work.

4. What are the difficulties or barriers in gaining access?

- Access is greatly helped by projects like City Limits that demonstrate what is possible with proper support. However, when these projects are time-limited with short-term funding there is a major barrier to extending good practice to all. The issue of a statutory framework is fundamental.
- Some email programmes and websites aid access but many make access more difficult. Over-complicating things becomes a barrier. Having access to technology at school but not at home is a common problem.
- Poor quality learning materials are a problem – the quality has decreased as the government intervention has increased.
- An over-simplified, linear model of learning stages (P-scales) gets in the way of rich learning experiences. This gets worse with target-setting and benchmarking.
- Too much faith in learning support assistants as the facilitators of access – taking the responsibility away from teachers.
- The problem of focusing on barriers to National Curriculum achievement rather than barriers to learning. This leads to meaningless individual education plans and reporting of what people have sat through rather than what they have learned.
- Different departments and professions not working together. Despite talk of joined-up thinking and child-centred planning health professionals have become less involved in supporting children's services and education.
- Outcomes-driven education, which gets in the way of attending to learning processes.

5. What are people's experience of access?

- Sign and symbol systems can support communication. But some systems are professionally led and the vocabulary reflects this. The 2000 version of Wigit, however, is more democratic with consultation with users and the vocabulary includes protest words often missing in other systems.
- Wayne, Drew, Robin and Darren's experiences of school were not very happy ones. They were often not included in the decision-making process of moving schools. They noted that 'people should have listened'. College experiences were better but they still didn't have the equal rights to normative behaviour such as mobile phone use, intimacy in college spaces, that other students enjoyed.

- Can't always plan for inclusion or access, sometimes it happens by luck.
- Access is as much about the relationships that you develop with people as the goals or outcomes.

6. How can we make access better?

- The key to the success of City Limits seemed to be 'individual, tailor-made support'. (This theme also came out of the discussion on access to the National Curriculum.) There may not be shortcuts to knowing the person with learning disabilities well.
- City Limits focuses on ongoing, sustainable employment. This also implies that access is not something that happens and is finished – but that needs to be continually worked at. Getting access to a job also involves ongoing monitoring and evaluation.
- The City Limits approach tackles both giving the person with learning disabilities skills (an individual model) and fostering the kind of environment in which they can succeed (a social model). They place an emphasis on natural supports e.g. supportive colleagues, rather than support from outside the workplace.
- Getting jobs for people is helped by positive assessment – the whole ethos of starting with what people can do rather than what they cannot do and the premise that everyone can learn. There is also a holistic element – access to a job is just one part of a whole load of access issues for the person.
- Being creative helps – if one approach doesn't work – 'try another way'
- We can learn about access for one group from the experiences of other groups. City Limits also has projects on getting work for care-leavers, ex-offenders, vulnerable women, disabled people, and 16-25 year-olds. Some of the barriers to access are common and some are specific.
- Technology can help e.g. the idea of a multi-media CV, speech-to-text software (but sometimes it doesn't and sometimes technology *is* the problem). Attitudes are more important than gadgets!
- Ann and Kate from Home Farm Trust talked about how they believe assistive technologies has a powerful role to play in empowering people with learning disabilities to access employment and that many existing devices are suitable. Policy might make a difference? Legal entitlements should prevent the problem of Southampton people having access to City Limits style support and neighbouring people having nothing like it.
- In education the key is access to creative, reflective teachers with a positive, problem-solving attitude. Their own access to specialist knowledge and support is important too. Teachers need to know the individual children.

7. Emerging Themes

- The past and the future of access
- Things that are central to facilitating access
- The commonality and complexity of barriers to access
- Do we need one access solution or many solutions?
- Facilitating access to disabled as well as non-disabled communities:
Getting the balance right

Some questions that we may come back to in future seminars

- a) Does access to a meaningful education for children with learning difficulties simply hinge on them having the equal opportunity to be taught the same things as other (non-disabled) children in a mainstream setting, or is it more about having equity in terms of how their learning needs are recognised and empowered?
- b) Is enough being done to ensure teachers and teaching assistants have the right kinds of knowledge, skill and understanding to educate children who have learning disabilities?
- c) Does policy make a difference? What has happened because of Valuing People? What will happen because of Every Child Matters?
- d) What difference does and could legislation make? How far are we towards establishing, for example, a right to work?
- e) Access seems to depend on special people putting in a special effort: is this right, will this always be the case?

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