Living Life to the Full:
An Exploration of the Role of
Further Education for Young People
with Learning Disabilities in Britain

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Abstract
Over recent years, post-16 education and training in colleges of further education in Britain has been made more accessible to students with learning disabilities. This paper examines some of the factors that have led to the increased level of inclusion of such students into mainstream college life, particularly the role of student services departments. The paper highlights good practice carried out by student services, including support workers, inter-agency work, counselling, specialised assessment and provision of tutorial support for students with learning disabilities.

Relevant legislation and policies are examined briefly along with concepts such as ‘Lifelong Learning’ and ‘Inclusive Learning’. An overview of the curriculum offered to students with learning disabilities is given and the impact of recent educational and funding policies outlined.

This paper draws the conclusion that colleges of further education in Britain can contribute significantly to the quality of life for young people with learning disabilities; it has the intention of encouraging a dialogue between colleagues in Australasia and Britain and to share good practice, rather than disseminate any research findings or develop a new theoretical stance.

Introduction

“Learning enables people to play a full part in their community. It strengthens the family, the neighborhood and consequently the nation. It helps us to fulfill our potential and opens the doors to a love of music, art and literature. That is why we value learning for its own sake as well as for the quality of opportunity it brings.”

David Blunkett MP
Secretary of State for Education and Employment,
Independent Newspaper (1998)

The above quote from David Blunkett, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment in England seems to echo the principles of the person-centred approach to learning as championed by Carl Rogers as far back as 1969, the main principles and recommendations of the Report of the Tomlinson Committee on ‘Inclusive Learning in Further Education’ (1996) and pre-empt the philosophy of the 1999 Report by the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education ‘All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education. Young people with learning disabilities can be helped and supported through education and training in their quest for ‘normal lives’ in local communities. Although educational reforms throughout this century have made some provision for post-compulsory education and training regarding students with learning disabilities, until recent years a truly inclusive way of working with post-sixteen students in colleges of further education has not taken place. This paper is intended to encourage the sharing of good practice in the area of working with young people in colleges of further education in Britain and invite discussion and comments from colleagues in Australia and New Zealand, who may be working in similar ways.

Colleges of further education in Britain can make a valuable contribution to the quality of life for people who have varying degrees of learning disability. Some individuals will receive the education and training necessary for employment, whilst others are able to improve their life-skills to enable them to live more independent lives. This paper intends to look at the contribution that can be made by colleges of further education and the support systems that enable students to access education and training in ways that suit their diverse needs. A brief outline of what is meant by learning disabilities in Britain will also be given, along with an overview of the context of further education and training in relation to people with learning disabilities, also the legislation and Government policies that inform practice.
Learning disabilities: terminology

The terminology used to describe or categorize people with learning disabilities or learning difficulties varies globally, with the term ‘learning disabilities’ being the label that is most widely used in Britain. Even then it is only the expression used amongst professionals in education, health and social care, the legal system and policy making at the current time. Historically, terminology has changed according to the various legislation and social policies of the time. The term ‘learning difficulties/disabilities’ is applied to individuals who have a cognitive impairment that in some way negatively affects their ability to learn. The type of person labeled in this way may vary from having difficulty with numeracy and literacy to having more complex difficulties as ascribed to some of the genetic syndromes. The terminology used to define this group of people varies in Britain between the lay population and professionals, with historical terms that professionals now regard as disrespectful or politically incorrect, such as ‘mental handicap’, ‘mental sub-normality’ and ‘mental retardation’ still in use amongst some members of the general population. This can cause difficulties when working in an international context because the various terminologies are applied differently in other countries. For example, in North America, legislation refers to people with learning disabilities as being ‘mentally retarded’, a term that deeply offends clients and their carers in Britain. In Australia and New Zealand, the expression ‘intellectual impairment’, which is used infrequently in Britain, appears to be widely used to describe a similar group of people. In Britain the term ‘learning difficulties’ can also apply to people with forms of dyslexia, although in these cases the word ‘specific’ is most often used as a prefix to signal differentiation. The type of student referred to in this paper will fit the category of having an I.Q. below 75, therefore having mild (50-75), moderate (30-50) or severe (below 30) disabilities. The Education Acts (1993, 1992) propose that an individual can be said to have learning disabilities if ‘he has significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of persons of his age’, a definition that is extremely inconsistent in nature, making definitive assessment (within the framework of the Further Education Funding Council) of students difficult to carry out. The FEFC’s (1997) statistics show that 18.9% of students with learning disabilities enrolled at colleges of further education in Britain have moderate learning disabilities, 15.1% have severe learning disabilities, 1.1% have profound and complex disabilities, with most of the remainder having mild, or unspecified learning disabilities. To aid clarification within the international context, the term ‘learning disabilities’ will be used throughout this paper.

Context: further education and training in Britain

Further education in Britain needs to be understood within the general framework of the state education system. Children in Britain begin their education at around five years, (or earlier if nursery education is included), starting with Primary level, moving into Secondary level at eleven years of age, completing their statutory compulsory education at age sixteen. The National Curriculum gives strict instructions as to the subjects taught and the levels of attainment expected at each age. The further education sector in Britain comprises Colleges of Further Education, Colleges of Technology, private training providers, Sixth Form Colleges, commercial organisations, businesses and industry, all providing post-compulsory education and training to a wide and diverse section of the population. Provision includes specialist courses for students with learning disabilities and extra support to achieve nationally recognised qualifications, such as National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs).

There are parallels to be drawn between the further education sector in Britain and the provision made for post-compulsory education and training in Australia and New Zealand, with specialist courses being provided within the Community Education framework and within T.A.F.E., along with private training and education providers and specialist colleges. The system in Australia and New Zealand also makes provision for students with learning disabilities to access the National Qualification Framework of certification for vocational qualifications at entry level with support where appropriate.
Legislation and policy

The increased inclusion of people with learning disabilities in further education and training in England has come about as a result of legislation and policy over recent years. The Further and Higher Education Act (1992) requires colleges of further education to make adequate full-time provision for students with learning disabilities who are between sixteen and eighteen years of age and full-time or part-time provision for those aged nineteen or over. The Children Act (1989), Community Care Act (1989), the Disabled Persons Act (1986) and the Education Act (1996), along with the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and the new Disability Discrimination Act (1999) all impact on the provision of services and the access of services for people with learning disabilities. The Report ‘All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education’ by the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (1999) has implications for the funding of education that extends the curriculum by providing diverse and creative ways of encouraging each individual to achieve their highest potential within a cultural context. The notion of culture within the framework of this report includes disability of all types, attitudes to disability and an acceptance that there may be specific cultural differences due to disability, for example, what is known in Britain as ‘deaf culture’, with reference to the world of deaf people who use British Sign Language.

The setting up of the Social Exclusion Unit by the Labour Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has further put the notion of inclusion onto the political agenda. Government policies in Britain ensure that funding is available for the provision of education and training for students with learning disabilities; this provides financial incentives for colleges of further education and some private education and training organisations. Increasing pressure from disability action groups has encouraged colleges of further education to aim to widen participation and access to students with learning disabilities.

Lifelong Learning

The concept of ‘Lifelong Learning’ has been adopted throughout Britain as a blueprint for the future education and training of the population as a whole; however, one might wonder what this may mean to people with learning disabilities. The Government’s Green Paper on Lifelong Learning (1998) aims to encourage people to continue to learn after leaving school and suggests that the learning process should last throughout an individual’s life.

“Many of us continue to learn after we leave school: through further and higher education, at work, in our leisure time and in the roles we play in the local community. Education helps limit social division, makes individuals more employable and can influence our prosperity and personal growth. However, there are still too many people for whom education has not worked. To overcome this, we need to make the process of learning more attractive and more accessible.”

Dr Kim Howells, Minister for Lifelong Learning
(Independent Newspaper 5th March 1998)

It is important that people with learning disabilities are given equal opportunities to attend college and add to their quality of life through education and training. Moreover, there is substantial justification for learning to be a lifelong process particularly for people with learning disabilities. Continuing to learn throughout adulthood means that, as with the general population, some individuals with learning disabilities can build upon their knowledge and skills in order to maintain their employability in an ever-changing marketplace. However, it is just as important to help a substantial number of people with learning disabilities to increase their level of life-skills and live progressively more independently; or even to get the most out of their leisure time. A significant section of the learning disabled population will require ongoing education and training in order to just maintain skills already learnt.

Inclusive Learning

The notion of ‘inclusive learning’ as applied to colleges of further education in Britain, describes an approach to learning which has formed the basis of a report compiled by Professor John Tomlinson and published by the Further Education Funding Council of Great Britain (1996). The inclusive
approach to learning outlined by this report can help young people with learning disabilities to access education and training in the most appropriate way for them:

“(the approach) avoids a viewpoint which locates the difficulty or deficit with the student and focuses instead on the capacity of the institution to understand and respond to the individual learner’s requirements. This means that we must move away from labelling the student and towards creating an appropriate educational environment; concentrating on how people learn so that they can be better helped to learn; and see people with disabilities and/or learning difficulties first and foremost as learners.”

Professor John Tomlinson
(Inclusive Learning: Principles and Recommendations FEFC 1996)

The Tomlinson Report has had a huge impact on the type of provision offered by colleges of further education and has made life better for students with learning disabilities in the following ways:

a) More funding has been made available for various types of support that students may need in order to attend college.

b) Colleges must provide good quality support for students in order to satisfy the Further Education Funding Council’s Inspectors.

c) More attention is paid to assessing students at the beginning of their course.

d) Students with learning disabilities are more likely to be included in mainstream college courses.

e) Learning programmes are specifically designed for students in order to fit in with their individual needs.

f) There is more evidence of different agencies working together for the benefit of the client.

The Broader Concept of Inclusion

Young people with learning disabilities come from many different backgrounds and have had extremely diverse and individual experiences of both life and learning. They will also have had varying experiences of living arrangements, although it is less likely nowadays that their experiences will include the type of institutional life that older people with learning disabilities may have had, particularly prior to the Community Care Act (1989), when institutional care was the norm for people with moderate to severe learning disabilities. Most young people with learning disabilities now either live at home with parents or other family carers, alternatively they may reside in what is known in Britain as ‘community homes’, ordinary houses with family-type groups of people, supported or cared for by community nurses and social workers.

Including them in the same learning environment as other people could strengthen the sense of community and the roles played by young people with learning disabilities within their local communities. By encouraging people of differing abilities, from the same communities, to learn side by side, they can be helped to build up friendships and eventually negative attitudes towards people with learning disabilities may change. The disability movement in Britain, a network of disabled people’s groups committed to the struggle for civil rights, led by the British Council of Disabled People, puts learning within a culture of inclusiveness high on its agenda. That highly significant amounts of public funds are used in genetic research to prevent people with learning disabilities from being born rather than in enhancing their lives, provokes vehement response from many activists involved with the politics of disability (Shakespeare, 1999).

With the help of specialist careers advisors, students with learning disabilities can often find paid employment, supported by specialist agencies where necessary. Phillips (1998) looks closely at the progress of supported employment in Britain and how much closer people with learning disabilities are moving towards getting ‘real jobs’, whilst Balkan (1998) explores in depth the notion of ‘inclusive employment’. Finding a job in Britain can be hard for anyone in today’s climate of high unemployment, however, work placement experience and links forged with the business community
and local industries by college staff play an instrumental part in this process, often providing unexpected opportunities.

**Different Routes into Further Education**

Traditionally, mainstream students wanting to study at colleges of further education simply turn up on the advertised enrolment days. Whilst enrolment days are still part of entry onto college courses, students with learning disabilities are also able to access courses in other ways. College staff, particularly those who are attached to student service departments, often work very hard to build up links with many different agencies, opening up access to college for people who have learning disabilities. Examples of routes into enrolment on college courses include:

- g) Progression from special schools.
- h) Progression from mainstream comprehensive schools via Special Educational Needs (SENS) co-ordinators.
- i) Referral from social services or the probation service.
- j) Referral from behavioural support units.
- k) Referral from community nurses.
- l) Individual applications or from contact with parents/carers.
- m) Introductions following discussions with existing students (friends/relatives).
- n) Referrals from youth clubs, day centres, community homes.

Often, mainstream courses are unsuitable for students with learning disabilities, especially if disabilities are more severe. In some instances, special ‘packages’ are put together for individuals or groups of students. An example of this at Darlington College of Technology, includes a group of adults with learning disabilities who attend a Social Services Adult Training Centre on a daily basis. A need was highlighted for education in the area of basic literacy and numeracy needed for independent living training. This group now attends college on a part-time basis, their learning amongst other things includes how to read signs and symbols and handle the money needed for shopping. A member of staff from the Adult Training Centre attends college with the group to provide extra support.

**Inter-agency Work**

As mentioned above, links with other agencies can prove invaluable in providing routes into further education. As outlined by Routledge (1998), multi-agency policies need to be developed that would lead to effective transition from school to college. However, these multi-agency links are also important when a student is actually on a college course. The value of inter-agency working is seen in the success of education and training for individuals with learning disabilities, which is vastly increased when professionals work together to support the people in their ‘care’. Taking ‘care’ of people involves an assessment of their needs, which includes physical, emotional and cognitive needs and then making provision for those needs to be met. Therefore in order to follow an educational or training programme, young people who have learning disabilities are first assessed to determine the type of support needed in order to follow their learning programme.

**Supporting students: the role of student services**

Student services departments of colleges of further education can support students with learning disabilities in many ways, for example, some students will be able to access mainstream courses with extra help in the areas of literacy and numeracy (62.4%, according to the Further Education Funding Council, 1997). This type of service is provided for any student in college who requires it, regardless of other academic ability. Specialist services are available for students with specific learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, which often presents concurrently with other, more general learning disabilities. Assessments are carried out by specialist tutors in student services departments, particularly in the case of young people who have generalised learning disabilities because these can mask hidden specific difficulties at great detriment to the student.
Support workers are available to help students who also have physical disabilities, providing practical help in accessing the environment, as may be required for some wheelchair users or others with mobility problems. The type of support offered might include help with any activities of daily living, such as going to the toilet, help with catheters, mealtimes, specialist-feeding etc. Biederman (1998) provides excellent guidance for support staff and tutors working closely with students who need verbal prompting, hand-over-hand support and passive observation to aid confidence.

Behavioural problems are often experienced in young people with learning disabilities, ranging from over-sexualised boundary-less behaviour that is unacceptable in a public environment and may put the individual at risk of exploitation to the more dramatic ‘challenging’ types of aggressive behaviour. Behavioural support may be required, in which case a student will have a specially assigned support worker, often following a programme set out by an educational psychologist or an experienced personal tutor.

Students with learning disabilities, by virtue of the nature of their disabilities, may experience problems in accessing the curriculum, especially within a mainstream environment. This can lead to lack of confidence and low self-esteem. Classroom support may be offered to such students and can include help in accessing learning resources, help with the reading of difficult material, working alongside teachers in designing resources that are more specific to the individual learner and acting as a consultant for the classroom teacher where appropriate.

A specialised support service is offered to students with hearing or visual problems, unfortunately sensory disabilities often compound the learning disabilities that are already present in students. Communication support may include signers skilled in British Sign Language, or Makaton, where appropriate. Joint (1998) outlines body signing, a way of communicating with deaf-blind individuals as a functional strategy, when other methods have proved too difficult to access. Hueber and Emery (1998) provide a useful social psychological analysis of facilitated communication and its implications for education.

Some students with learning disabilities require support in order to increase their level of autonomy and independence whilst following their programme of learning. A support worker may, for example, shadow a student who is learning to use public transport to attend college, in order to ensure safety and confidence at first. This type of support is gradually withdrawn as the student becomes more confident and can manage to use transport safely. A similar type of shadowing support may be used when a student begins a work placement.

Tutorial support is provided by experienced tutors, making sure that the student has a named person as their personal tutor. The tutor can provide counselling support, a referral system and can give encouragement, helping to build up confidence and self-esteem in the student. Maintaining links with other agencies, parents or carers is also within the remit of a personal tutor, therefore such tutors carry a caseload of students and are allowed time from general teaching duties to carry out their tutor role effectively. This tutor system has proved to be one of the main factors in the retention of students and the early resolution of difficulties and problems. The personal tutors are responsible for the design and provision of discrete programmes of learning for those students who are unable to access the mainstream curriculum or who may need some sort of transitional period before progressing onto a mainstream course.

Counselling

One of the major contributions of the student support services is to provide counselling support to students with learning disabilities. This can prove challenging to the counsellor, in that more creative ways of working may need to be employed in order to overcome the difficulties in cognition and understanding that often arise. A person-centred approach to counselling (Rogers, 1951), is most often used, incorporating the use of art materials, clay and extensive use of metaphor therapy. Difficulties in communication often arise, especially with students who have multiple handicaps; some of whom may have hearing impairments coupled with severe learning disabilities. As many as 27.4% of students with learning disabilities in colleges of further education receive
speech, communication or language therapy (FEFC 1997), therefore the use of mime, Makaton or British Sign Language may be adopted, although if a third person is present in the counselling session, the issue of confidentially is carefully considered (Corker 1994). The ethics of counselling extremely vulnerable individuals are continually monitored and explored in supervision.

Students with learning disabilities may find it difficult to access counselling services (Moulster 1988) and the personal tutor is often instrumental in providing the link necessary to provide information and introduce the student to the counsellor. The personal tutor may also provide the counsellor with any information regarding the student’s most effective method of communication (Beveride et al., 1997). It has been shown that adolescents with moderate to severe learning disabilities suffer more depression and find it more difficult to receive help than other adolescents (Masi, 1998). This makes it an even higher priority that such a counselling service is provided and is accessible to young people with learning disabilities.

Curriculum

One of the main difficulties faced by colleges of further education is in trying to get the balance right between making all college courses more accessible to students who have learning disabilities and providing special or discrete courses where needed. In the spirit of Tomlinson (1996) and the concept of inclusion, Pollock (1998) looks at ways of moving young people with learning disabilities into mainstream education. Many adolescents experience their first taste of mainstream education when they leave a specialised school to attend a college of further education.

Young people with learning disabilities are able to attend many different college courses, following the implementation of the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) and the recommendations of the Tomlinson Report (1996), however, MacKay (1999) suggests that the provision of education in Britain is still found lacking in the way it treats disadvantaged young people. Traditionally, the type of course on offer to young people with learning disabilities has been restricted, with a distinct lack of suitable qualifications. The way in which colleges are now funded in Britain means that in most cases achievement of a qualification is expected, the number of qualifications offered to all types of students having increased significantly over the past few years. This can have both positive and negative affects on students.

On a positive note, the majority of students in attendance at college aim to achieve a qualification and the philosophy of inclusiveness in British society today demands that students with learning disabilities be given parity of esteem with other students, especially as in the past students with learning disabilities did not have many opportunities to gain qualifications. However, one of the negative aspects of looking for outcomes in the form of qualifications is that individual needs vary immensely, for example, achievement of greater confidence and self-esteem may be the main goal for some students rather than vocational training or improvement of basic literacy or numeracy skills. Qualifications that take account of this type of outcome are now being more widely used, such as the London City and Guilds Profiles of Achievement, a qualification that allows for the setting of aims and objectives specific to the individual.

Other qualifications achieved by students with learning disabilities may include National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), or part of an NVQ, however statistics show that 48% of students with learning disabilities are more likely to follow pre-vocational or foundation programmes (Further Education Funding Council 1997). NVQs are based on occupational standards and are widely recognised by employers with the potential to greatly increase a student’s chances of employment. The qualifications are mainly based on practical assessment of skills with collection of ‘evidence’ to show that students understand why they are carrying out certain tasks. The evidence required allows for diversity and a move away from the traditional written assignment work through the use of media such as: photographs, audio and video recordings to show that a student is able to carry out certain tasks satisfactorily. GNVQs (General National Vocational Qualifications) are accessible to some more able students with learning disabilities, but involve a certain amount of written work, requiring a higher level of literacy and numeracy. Achieving qualifications in literacy
and numeracy, such as the London City and Guilds Wordpower and Numberpower, give students greater confidence in their own abilities and are useful to present to potential employers.

The Trade Union Reform and Employment Rights Act (1993) has changed the basis on which careers guidance is offered, now being required to: ‘have regard to the requirements of disabled people’, however, employment is inappropriate for some young people with learning disabilities, either because of the nature of their disability or due to the financial considerations that mean living on disability state benefits is more practical than taking extremely low paid employment. In these cases making the choice of education and training can be more difficult. Nevertheless, there are many other qualifications, such as those offered by the Open College Network, which can lead to improved life-skills, for example: Independent Living, Cooking Skills, Sewing for Independence etc.

Colleges of further education can play a valuable part in helping young people with learning disabilities to become more prepared for independent living, supported by the Social Services and supported employment services (Simon 1998). Some students with learning disabilities mature directly as a result of their college experience, having developed the knowledge and skills necessary to equip them for the move out of their parental homes into communal or individual accommodation.

Raitasuo et. al. (1998) suggest that young people with learning disabilities have more satisfying lives when their social networks are extended. Some students with learning disabilities begin their college course as shy, withdrawn and uncommunicative individuals, perhaps exhibiting emotional and behavioural difficulties. Several months later they have integrated fully into college life, extending their circle of friends and acquaintances, gaining confidence and self-esteem. This process of integration or inclusion into the college often extends to the local community, which has been shown in a study by Gilkes (1998) to reduce dependency on social services.

As quoted earlier by David Blunkett (1998), Secretary of State for Employment and Education, learning can also improve the quality of life by increasing appreciation of the arts. Courses in art, pottery, music and movement, drama, can all contribute to the quality of life for the individual, whilst increasing the opportunities for social contact and inclusion in the community.

Conclusion

Further education is constantly changing in response to the needs of employers, local communities and individuals. People who have traditionally found access to further education restricted, such as those who have learning disabilities are now finding that more of their needs are being met by colleges of further education. These needs are often very individual and require careful assessment in order to ensure that the provision of education and training, including support services is appropriate. My work with students who have learning disabilities within a college of further education leaves me in no doubt that further education can increase the quality of life and provide opportunities that enable many individuals who have learning disabilities to live life to the full, whilst acknowledging that there is still some distance to travel before all students with learning disabilities have their needs met within the context of education and training.

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