

Workshop: Life at School: Giving All Children a Voice

Children and Young People's Views and Perspectives of Life at Residential Special School; an exploration of how their views can be gathered to influence practice in other settings.

Facilitator: Vivian Hill

Outcomes from the session:

- Described the techniques and approaches that were used to gain the views and perspectives of children and young people with a range of disabilities living in residential special schools

Background:

Local authorities are committed to ensuring that young people with special educational needs and disabilities are educated and have access to health and social care services within their local communities. But there is a significant minority of young people with special educational needs and disabilities who live and are educated away from home – many, some distance from their families – in residential special schools. These can range from part-time placements to those receiving around-the-clock 52-week care.

The Life at School project, funded by the Office of the Children's Commissioner, was designed to understand young people's experiences – the good and the bad – of being schooled away from home.

The study aimed to determine: to what extent do young people have learning and life experiences that they have chosen? How is their 'voice' interpreted, listened to and acted upon by the adults who support them? What kind of support strategies do adults use to help young people to communicate and to promote their ability to regulate their own behaviour?

Eliciting the 'voice' of young people who do not speak or sign is notoriously difficult. The report of the study is due out later this year and results are currently under embargo.

Presentation

Vivian Hill showed a PowerPoint presentation about the methods used in the study, which included 83 young people with a range of needs, included 11 learners with SLD and PMLD needs. Some of these young people attend provision for pupils with profound needs Vivian described the techniques used with these young people to undertake structured observations throughout periods of up to 24 hours.

A film was shown of the young researchers group. Due to the very short timeframe for the research Vivian explained it had not been possible to expand this group to fully represent the entire residential special school population. The work with the young researchers helped IoE ensure the participation of young people in the design

of the research and helped them to consider how they worked best with the young people.

Feedback from the discussion:

It must be noted that the time for questions and discussion was limited due to some sessions over-running and the viewing of the research video. Key points that arose in the discussion are outlined below.

- The CB-NSG members agreed with the importance of seeking the voice of children and young people at residential school
- Members of the group were interested to hear about how researchers sought views from children and young people with learning disabilities
- The concern around why these children were in a residential school in the first place was raised – with the right support locally, children and young people should remain at home and not have their right to a family life disturbed.
- Members believed that some issues had not been covered, or were ‘glazed over’ and that the views of children and young people with severe learning disabilities had not been adequately included. The young people participating in the film did not appear to have severe learning disabilities and this led some members to worry about the extent of their representation, more broadly, in the research.
- There were concerns that the film was overwhelmingly positive, in contrast to much of the existing research evidence. Members understood that the film focused on the ‘Young Researchers’ group, but felt if the film was to be used in any public way, this unrepresentative sample would have to be clearly highlighted as members were concerned about the impact this film could have on public opinion.
- It was suggested that the voluntary participation of schools created a significant bias to the results that should be highlighted before conclusions are drawn
- A longer time frame for the research would be desirable to have overcome a number of the issues highlighted
- There was no reference to what happens after school, do pupils have the skills necessary to live in the outside world? Do they have the desire to? Or is it setting them up for institutionalised life? How does the school encourage relationships with non-disabled individuals?

Actions to be taken forward

- Researchers to carefully consider the feedback from the CB-NSG members in writing the research report
- CBF to write to Children’s Commissioner’s office to register the concerns and the points made by CB NSG members.

Edit: The final report has been published and can be found here

http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content_910

Please note also that the Office for the Children’s Commissioners produced an overview report which sets the ‘Life at School’ report in context

http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content_909

It clearly states that “In undertaking this work, we did not attempt to address the complex range of issues and events which lead to decisions being made to commission residential special school placements for children with a wide range of often complex and multiple special educational needs and disabilities. However, for many children and their parents, the adversity and disruption experienced in their earlier lives, ahead of such profound decisions being made for the child concerned is a recurrent theme. A decision to place a much-loved child away from home is momentous and can be fraught with difficulty.” And that “We are clear that much more - and vitally, much more timely, sensitive and consistent - support is needed so that families can sustain their family lives and provide a good quality of life for all their children. That this ideal should be enabled and resourced at home is proven by much research to be the best option.”