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Does Your College of Further Education have Learning Difficulties

Abstract :

For too long Colleges have been ready to label students as having “Special Needs”. It is now time they faced up to their own learning difficulties.

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Does Your College of Further Education have Learning Difficulties?

There are so many strange practices which have grown up around the schooling of young people who have been labelled as having learning disabilities. The most bizarre of which has to be the practice of removing or preventing the person from participating in their local mainstream school and forcing them into segregated special schools, a practice which often leads the individual into isolation and separation from their local community. For many who are concerned about this practice the increase in opportunities made available in the further education sector for people who had previously experienced segregated special schooling was seen as a way of providing something different, something more positive, another chance to gain their rightful place in a mainstream service within their local community. However, the experience for many such students has been more of the same bizarre practices and a perpetuation of damaging exclusion.

After almost fifteen years of expansion and re-organisation in the further education sector the provision for students described as having learning disabilities has lagged behind other significant initiatives colleges have taken to widen the representation of people from local communities. This observation was supported by the Chief Executive of the recently formed Further Education Funding Council, William Stubbs, who acknowledged this position in a lecture he delivered in 1992 suggesting that while there was a significant increase in numbers of students with "learning disabilities" attending the Further Education sector there was very little known about the effectiveness of the provision offered to them.

It is clear however that even with a national legislative framework to support learners who may require additional support, colleges have tended to adopt fairly ad hoc responses in meeting the aspirations of students who have arrived from the segregated special school sector. Prospective students and their parents can be forgiven for being confused about what is available and to what they are entitled when they look to their local college of further education for post 16 provision. Decisions made about the design and range of courses for such students appear well intentioned, but not very well informed. Courses and activities continue to be based upon a "deficit model", with negative assumptions stemming from the learners previous segregated, and often devaluing experience. The benefits such students can bring to a college when they are offered a second chance in more appropriate and creative environments is yet again camouflaged and suppressed by the replication of a similar style of exclusion from mainstream provision which exists in the compulsory school sector of education.

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The many laudable pronouncements about recognising and meeting the individual potential, developing personal skills and enhancing existing qualities, regardless of ability, can often be found in the rhetoric of the official college policy statements and course literature but, unfortunately, rarely is this rhetoric translated into valued student experiences.

Failing to learn from previous experiences is an indication that the organisation has learning difficulties.

"...attempting to understand the future by relying on the past only forces us to try and solve the same problems over and over again. All our effort only makes the problem worse"

P.M. Senge. The Fifth Discipline. Doubleday Currency

The negative practice of labelling, categorising and segregating groups of individuals on the basis of, often, assumed "learning difficulties" serves to devalue the individuals and the activities in which they are engaged. To continue such a practice is a clear indication of the learning difficulties exhibited by the college, in that the inevitable outcomes of devalued segregation services and negative labelling of individuals are clearly not likely to enable individuals to reach their full potential. However, colleges appear to persist in adopting similar approaches and constructing similar segregated environments which have demonstrably failed to give students access to mainstream educational provision in the compulsory sector of education. Case histories (see Alison Wertheimer: Learning to Work Together 1990- 1992. SKILL publication) of individuals starting life in segregated "service" will invariably show how such a service leads to further segregated provision in employment, in housing, in social activities, perpetuating a self-fulfilling prophecy, which reinforces the fallacy that people forced into segregated services need segregated service. However, what is increasingly unacceptable is the failure of the college to accept its own organisational failings, while continuing to label the student as having the "learning difficulty" resulting in the individual taking responsibility for their continued exclusion from other mainstream students.

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Extracts from a Series of F.E. Evaluations

In 1992 - detailed evaluations were carried out in five colleges of further education in the North West of England. The evaluation focused upon the experiences of learners who had been enrolled and categorised by the college as having "severe learning disabilities".

The evaluations were carried out by teams of six people consisting of teachers from the pre and post 16 sectors of education, psychologists, people from social and health services as well as people who had used segregated services and parents of young people who had been described as having severe learning disabilities. Some of the team members had first hand and very detailed knowledge of the workings of the FE system. Others had no specific knowledge other than that of an "ordinary" member of the public. It was the dynamics of this collaboration which offered many varied and valuable insights into the effectiveness or otherwise of college provision.

A key element in the evaluation process was to focus upon the general and specific experiences of the college students; to observe hear and document their individual perceptions of the college and the courses on which they were enrolled. To gather such information each team member spent a period of time "shadowing" individual students throughout a part of their day. In addition, the evaluation team conducted over 250 hours of structured interviews, observations, and discussions over a five day period with individuals and groups across the whole of the college; from teaching and support staff to administrative and auxiliary staff, from maintenance and catering staff across to the principalship and governing body as well as "outside" agencies i.e. Careers Service, Day Centre Services.

Information gathered resulted from detailed and often exhaustive team debate which formed the basis of verbal and written reports with recommendations and action plans presented to the principalship of the college.

What are the functions of a College of Further Education?

The first phase of discussion centred around the functions of a college of further education. A "team consensus" evolved about what its functions might be which included:

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- To learn new skills
- To improve existing skills
- To gain some form of accreditation
- To develop leisure interests
- To meet new people and form new relationships
- To have a "second chance" at formal education
- To offer something different from the daily routines
- To have your aspirations taken seriously
- To acquire the valued status of being a student
- To improve job prospects
- To be taught by qualified enthusiastic and experienced tutors
- To have access to a wide range of expertise and specialist resources
- To have access to a wide range of curricular opportunities
- To enhance self-esteem

Whilst it was recognised that this list was not by any means definitive, it did offer some guidance on the possible expectations an individual may have when seeking a place in their local college of further education. The second phase of discussion focused upon "Model Coherency"; how a service meets the needs of those who use it? In this instance it was necessary to establish how a further education college met the requirements of a "typical" F.E. student.

Model coherency: based upon Design for Accomplishment by Dr. John O'Brien.

A culturally valued analogue was arrived at by considering six questions about the Further Education Service.

1. When do students learn?
2. Where do classes take place?
3. With whom does a student learn?
4. By whom are students taught?
5. How do students learn?
6. What happens in F.E.?

The data arrived at following this process was then used as a "benchmark" to identify what service an "F.E. College Student" might reasonably expect to receive. The analogue that emerged was then used to compare the "actual" experiences of the students who had been labelled by the college as having "learning disabilities" by asking the same six questions in the light of the data gathered.

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Typical experiences of the students once enrolled in colleges of Further Education who had arrived at the college via segregated schools.

- They had been labelled negatively and categorised according to the label
- Access to curriculum was limited, almost all the student experiences were in segregated settings
- Learning environments were often inappropriate i.e. Cookery, Drama, Craft work in the same classroom and often with the same tutor.
- Isolation and segregation from the main body of the college.
- Stigmatisation by the main body of the college.
- Staff contacts were mainly restricted to "Special Needs Tutors".
- Boredom and little sense of purpose.
- Sense of rejection by mainstream college and students.
- Repetition of curricular experience.
- Many students had come from the same special school as other course members and had little opportunity of making new friendships.
- Very little involvement in mainstream social activities or with mainstream students.
- Not valued as student in a college of F.E.
- Would not be missed if they were not there.
- The Students were often called "Special Needs Students" and Special Needs was often seen as another curriculum area.
- Very low self-esteem.

The most common impression which was underpinned by student comments was that the provision within the colleges could be compared to that of a Social Services "mini" Day Centre. The enrolment of students was commonly through a "Special Needs" section which started a process of segregation away from the mainstream of the college and rapidly developed into noticeable isolation. The locations where students would congregate were often identifiable and described by mainstream staff and students in disparaging ways; *"That's the unit where they go"* or *"That's where the handicapped go"* or *"That place is for that sort of student"*. Special Curricula was designed and tended to be focused upon "deficiencies" of students rather than the particular skills of the students. The model adopted was similar to that of a segregated special school where students would remain in the same base and have the same teacher for a wide range of subjects. Few attempts were made to adapt existing mainstream curriculum or change the teaching methods to meet individual needs.

There was little evidence of progression from a segregated course to a mainstream course. Some of the students had been within the same programme for five years or more. There was little opportunity for social contact with mainstream student and staff, often resulting in the students feeling isolated at college which continued at home.

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One twenty two year old student who had been on the same "Special Needs" programme for six years and regularly indicated that he "just wanted to be a real student", had been promised that if he "behaved himself" and "worked hard" he might be able to get into a mainstream English language class. The student would spend a great deal of his spare time walking around college with a large folder under his arm, the folder contained large amounts of clean sheets of writing paper. Whilst wandering the college the student would wait at the back of a queue of mainstream students, who were waiting to enter their classroom, he would purposefully follow the students to the door and at the point where the last student entered he would casually veer off into another direction while the door closed behind him. He had been observed following this personal ritual in isolation and silence on a number of occasions.

How can colleges be helped to overcome their learning difficulties?

The further education sector has seen many significant changes in the last ten years which have been introduced to encourage a much greater degree of participation and contribution from a much wider section of the local community. In order to support this increase in population colleges have taken such initiatives as:

- Centralised admission with careful personal course guidance for prospective students.
- Student Centred Learning.
- Access to a full range of learner support: It is recognised that all students at some stage of their course may require particular assistance at a particular time and the college should make available a wide and diverse range of provision to ensure that those support needs are met.
- Different modes of attendance to accommodate individual circumstances.
- A wide variety of teaching methodologies to gain the maximum benefits from the diversity of student abilities.
- Modularisation of Courses: Credit Accumulation and Transfer.
- Clear Equal Opportunities policy statement.
- Recognition that "outside" agencies have a role to play in curriculum development. i.e. Commerce or Industry.

Such initiatives, when implemented, can be very effective in ensuring that the students have a valuable, productive and enjoyable experience within the organisation. What is ironic however, is that many of the central initiatives adopted are invariably designed separate from the "Special Needs" organisations and reinforce a view of isolation from the College. Charles Handy in his book, *The Age of Unreason*, introduces the concept of "upside down thinking" where organisations have to be creative enough to consider common practices in a totally different way. Such a concept

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can be applied to colleges who describe students as having learning disabilities. The college should recognise students who may require additional support are not a "burden" or a "drain" on resources but a crucial opportunity for staff to learn new and more effective teaching skills which, once acquired, will benefit all other students because staff will be more able to recognise and receive a much wider diversity of contributions.

Colleges that persist in maintaining dual systems and wasting energy on perpetuating the segregation of a proportion of its students, continue to do a disservice to the whole population of the organisation and will fail to learn the skills necessary for effective growth. Colleges must start to dismantle the special needs machinery, they must remove the Special Needs Units, and recognise that the skills of "Special Needs Staff" who also tend to be isolated from the main body of the college are best used, facilitating mainstream opportunities for individual students.

The college evaluations highlighted examples of some excellent practice, where individual students, who had initially been labelled by the college as having "learning disabilities", were effectively included within mainstream courses demonstrating many refreshing outcomes which were of benefit to all tutors and students concerned with the enterprise. Success stories in all cases observed, resulted from the efforts and tenacity of individual members of staff. The learning college has to enhance the energy and imagination of individual initiatives which seek to challenge barriers that exclude individual students.

One member of staff when asked about the financial constraints of including all students said

"If you think the cost of inclusion is expensive try adding up the cost of exclusion to the individual, to their family, to the college and to their community."

The Further Education Funding Council has recently established a committee advising on learning disability/difficulty issues. Such a committee can preside over the best and the worst of all possible scenarios, but fundamental to this committee has to be a diversity of representations which includes a commitment to representation from individuals who have themselves experienced segregated services.

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The council also has to demonstrate it is a learning organisation. It should seek to orchestrate policy steers and financial supports which recognise ALL students as true partners in the learning process and promote a fully inclusive educational service which goes beyond the existing rhetoric of inclusion to truly valued and valuing service.

ADDENDUM (which was written three months later)

The seminars at the University of London, Institute of Education, organised by Liz Maudsley and Lesley Dee, have generated a very important debate relating to learners described as having learning disabilities/difficulties within the post 16 sector of education; a debate long overdue. I have found the contributions to this series of seminars to be both interesting and challenging, however, I do not accept that the debate has become polarised into 'Inclusion: for and against'. I believe the arguments in favour of supporting ALL students within the "mainstream" of education, regardless of ability, have been won. The challenge to us all is HOW we support individuals appropriately within the mainstream not IF we support them. We have moved to a position where it is no longer necessary to justify why an individual should be included into the mainstream of the college, to a position where there is an unease about their continued exclusion.

I accept that the language of inclusion can often sound rhetorical and glib and may appear to underestimate the many challenges that face us all in realising our vision. However, if we are to have an effective post 16 sector of education we have to begin to formulate new questions about learners, particularly if they participate and offer contributions that have not been generally recognised and valued. We have to find new ways of "being with" learners rather than delegating our responsibilities to others. We have to find new ways of negotiating with learners. We have to find new ways of ensuring that all learners feel included within their college. We have to find ways of recognising our own limitations and valuing the strengths we have in meeting the challenges such a paradigm shift will bring.

The questions being asked at the present time are stuck in "short-termism". A preoccupation with measurable competencies, and the making of money from educational activities. Or how can we get this student through the system as quickly as possible? There is little recognition that learning can take time, it can be justifiably inefficient, it can involve trial and error, it can be frustrating and

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require many different resources, but colleges like school should be places where learners feel safe to make mistakes.

We have to reinstate some of the question that brought many of us into formal education. What do we want for learners several generations from now? What society do we want? How do we create communities where opportunities do not simply depend on your date and place of birth?

It is unacceptable to use money as the excuse for continued exclusion of individuals from our communities. It is particularly offensive when such an excuse comes from an organisation which purports to represent the views of disabled students. In the many years I have spent in further education I have found no correlation between the financial security of a college and its commitment to inclusion. Some of the most creative approaches have come from colleges where the resources were most sparse.

The Further Education Funding Council, we are told, is committed to equal opportunities. They should be equally committed to ending the injustices perpetuated by segregated education for people who have been traditionally excluded because the school or college has been unable to organise itself effectively when meeting individuals needs. The FEFC has to show courage and take a strong lead rather than create a protective cover for those personal egos who see themselves as the "experts in learning disabilities and difficulties", a misconception that serves no one and sustains the notion of individual deficiency rather than recognise the weaknesses within the system within which they are placed.

And for those within the further education sector who dismiss those in the inclusive education movement for being too idealistic and not living in the "real" world, let them ask President Nelson Mandela.