
Youth Justice SEND Case Study
30.3.2017

Child-Centred Learning

Darlington YOS

Key Points

- **Darlington YOS have adopted a three tier child-centred approach to personalising support and learning within the youth offending service**
- **Tier 1 All young people benefit from communication resources that have evolved over time (recorded audio statements, etc.)**
- **Tier 2 young people on orders have intervention packs that help address specific needs**
- **Tier 3 Specific needs or individualised engagement tools and strategies are also produced for those that need it**

Vicky Meaby (Darlington Learning and Skills Service) attended one of the regional workshops, and we were very interested in the “story of engagement” she wrote in her workshop evaluation. This is a summary of our dialogue, which was supplemented through follow-up emails and telephone conversations:

“We keep working hard to establish child-centred learning where learning meets the needs of the child as opposed to the child meeting the needs of the education system. “Progress” can be a dangerous word these days and often is detrimental to some of our most vulnerable young people. As a Youth Offending Service, we walk a difficult tightrope between working hard to meet the needs of a young person whom schools seem to have forgotten about/marginalised and (because of the provision we provide) services stepping back even further (“the YOS are educating them now- tick the box and move on”).

*One young person we worked with was LAC (Looked After Child), had been out of school for over two years and was assessed as on the autistic spectrum. His passion was **“The Walking Dead”**, so we built a series of maths and English sessions for him around the show and the characters. The young person engaged brilliantly, came up with his own ideas for learning, and displayed a wonderful ability to memorise and recall data! He eventually went back into education where he sat his maths and English GCSEs.*

For this young person, starting from where he was, and approaching the learning process in a child-centred way, turned out to be critical for his success.”

“For some of our most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people, we have to explore and capitalise on their interests and talents, be that in the arts, drama, sport, problem solving, making things, and go beyond the restrictions placed on their learning and engagement by what can be a restricting and restrictive timetable so that they have an opportunity to engage and shine. We need to look very differently at “progress” and consider each child’s unique learning journey”.

Tier 3: If a young person has a specific interest or issue an exercise may be developed, altered or applied in a different way to make it more engaging and increase its receptiveness. These alterations once utilised can then feed into the interventions permanently or be kept as an alternative should a similar issue arise in the future. Examples include the creation of 'Yu-Gi-Oh' style cards (a sort of top trumps/playing cards game) these included a variety of consequences and effects with a short piece of information, the young person then had to create the images to go with each card and talk about potential 'scores' based on how much it would impact on them.



Email following our final conversation:

“Great to speak with you on the phone this afternoon. The work you are doing is so important and if I can help in any way, I'm happy to do so.

So to power phrase our conversation: **we discussed that the opportunity to become literate and numerate is fundamentally a human right as it acts as a protective factor for children and young people in a multitude of ways. I completely agree, and would go further to state that access to learning is a child's human right; when we restrict opportunities to learn (as is so often the case for young people who offend or those who have become marginalised or 'adultified' in other ways) we severely reduce life outcomes for them.**

The curriculum and government policy right now is far too focused on a rigid definitions of 'progress' epitomised by 'progress 8' agenda which only serves to further marginalise those students who, for many reasons, may not hit these targets.

“This is preventing schools and learning providers from being able to meet children and young people where they are at, instead reproducing a narrative that labels those who do not achieve the 'magic C' in their GCSE English and Maths as failures. It is time we recognised that intelligence comes in multiple forms and that when we utilise and embrace the things a child is good at, we build their confidence and inspire them to learn right across the curriculum. Fundamentally, if we work in this way we are showing that education is for them, and that they have something to offer; if young people are made by the system to feel like they have nothing to bring to the table, it's hardly surprising that we see them opting out.

At present, Ofsted does not reward schools for their inclusive practice. Perhaps when this happens the way in which education is managed will change too. As someone who has worked in secondary schools, youth justice settings and within adult education on Access to HE programmes, I see all too often the damage that is done by an education system that forgets the power of inclusive learning. Of course all this disproportionately affects those living in poverty, children with mental health needs, our looked after children and our young people who become caught up in the criminal justice system; those who most need the stability of a high quality school placement are often those first out the door.

The young person I mentioned as an example to show that child centred learning can work was a looked after young man on the autistic spectrum who had been out of education for two years. He was deeply passionate about The Walking Dead, so we created bespoke English and Maths sessions for him with the show as the central theme of his learning. This re-engaged him with his learning, and as such he revealed a real talent for Maths alongside a vivid and creative imagination and a wonderful ability to memorise and recall data. The young person re-engaged with his learning, took his maths and English GCSE exams at the end of year 11 and then continued on with his learning on a local study programme.

Of course when I've shared this story I've heard time and again that this is impossible in a secondary school, there's no way it would work there. I would argue that in inclusive schools, it can and it does. All learning should be bespoke and meaningful; this is how you increase engagement and raise attainment across the board. When schools are brave enough to make the curriculum work for them (as opposed to them working for the curriculum) great things happen.

I taught in a secondary school where Thinking Skills and Philosophy for Children were embraced, where teachers were given the opportunity to see one another teach and to share practice. Where young people are given a bit of autonomy and encouragement, they absolutely fly, it's brilliant to see and exciting for that young person's future prospects. I know that this way of working enables young people to both reach their potential and to do so in a way that is meaningful to them."

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