

## Further Education for Pupils with Severe Learning Difficulties

One of the greatest worries for parents of young people with severe learning disabilities is post-school prospects. In recent years, the education and training opportunities have been increasing, offering a change for further personal, social and skill development. One particular course in Belfast which offers such opportunities has shown positive results.

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### SUMMARY

In September 1996, the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education (BIFHE) launched a two year, full-time Certificate course in Social and Vocational Skills primarily for students with severe learning difficulties (SLD) aged 17 to 19 years. Students transferred to the College from a Special School having previously attended the College in the previous year for one day per week.

The course curriculum included adult basic education, the use of information technology, independent travel, health promotion, work training and a work experience placement. The National Skills Profile was used to record the student's competencies. An inter-agency steering group guided the course development and delivery.

An evaluation of the course at the end of the second year involving the 17 students enrolled and their families, found that all but one had coped with the College environment; the course had increased students' confidence, the students' learning had been accredited, the work placements were particularly valued, and the parents' initial reluctance had dissipated. Ongoing issues included transport from home to College, ongoing links with the Special School, developments in the curriculum, students' inclusion in other College activities and post-course provision.

## **RATIONALE FOR THE COURSE**

The Belfast Institute for Further and Higher Education provides a range of vocational and educational courses from Certificate to Degree level to some 45,000 students on a full-time and part-time basis. Three factors encouraged the development of the full-time course for students with severe learning difficulties (SLD).

First, the number of pupils requiring a place at Glenveagh SLD School in Belfast was rising and would continue to do so in the coming years. Among the options considered to cope with this were to increase the school enrolment by using mobile classrooms, to start planning for an additional school or to free up places in the existing school by moving older students on to another facility than would meet their needs as well if not better. In the event the latter option was judged the most feasible in the short-term and was probably the least costly. This remains one of the most significant reasons for developing courses within Further Education Colleges, especially as pupils may have attended the same special school for eleven years or more.

Second, the trend nationally and internationally is to provide more inclusive learning opportunities for students with special educational needs (UNESCO, 1995). Although attention had been focused mainly on pre-school and primary education, various courses have been provided successfully in British Colleges of Further Education for older teenagers and adults with severe learning difficulties. These were recently reviewed by the Further Education Funding Council's Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities Committee chaired by Professor Tomlinson (1996) and the Funding Council have now set up an inclusive learning steering group to implement or develop their recommendations. Locally, BIFHE has provided special needs courses since 1982 and in particular a link course on one-day a week for pupils with severe learning difficulties. A full-time course for these pupils was therefore a logical extension of work done to date although it would make significant demands on College staff as they assume full responsibility for these students.

Third, the principal and staff of Glenveagh Special School under the leadership of the Principal, Kay Murphy, had begun to reshape their curriculum for senior pupils (McConkey, 1998). They had developed a number of initiatives to help the students acquire the skills required for community living, most notably work experience placements. However the school's location in an affluent city suburb made it more difficult for their students to access community resources such as shops, leisure activities and businesses. By contrast BIFHE had facilities located close to the city centre and all main bus routes.

The wishes of parents and of prospective students were *not* to the fore in establishing the course. Indeed, parents expressed initial reluctance to the idea and were persuaded to agree when assurances were given that their son or daughter could resume their place at the Special School if the College course proved unsuitable.

## **DESCRIPTION OF THE COURSE**

### **Aims**

The course aims to prepare young people to assume independence within their daily lives by developing their social, vocational and life skills. In particular, the course seeks to:

- **Prepare young people of school leaving age for the transition to adulthood and its inherent responsibilities;**
- **Provide an alternative route for young people of school leaving age alongside the traditional option of the Adult Day Centre or Workshop;**
- **Develop individual competence to assume full citizenship;**
- **Make a positive response to the current DHSS (NI) policy of social inclusion and respect the rights of all members of the community to access further education (as stated in the Mission Statement of BIFHE).**

### **Key features**

- **The course is designed to run over two academic years with 30 hours of time-tabled classes between 9.00 and 3.00 pm.**
- **There are twelve places in each year group but at the end of the second year, there were four second year students and ten first year students. (Three students had dropped out from the 17 enrolled.)**
- **The students' ages were as follows: one 16 years; three 17 years; eight 18 years and 2 nineteen years. All were assessed as having severe learning difficulties although five students had previously attended schools for pupils with moderate learning difficulties.**
- **Student attendance during 1997/98 was nearly 100% with parents contacting College to give a reason for absence.**
- **In the first year, one student had been absent for a number of weeks but this had not occurred in the second year.**
- **In all, ten college lecturers contributed to the course, ranging from 3 hours to 12 hours per week (i.e. the tutor in charge and the work placement supervisor). These included subject specialists such as in computing and leisure, as well as those with expertise in special educational needs.**

- A room on the 4th floor (with lift access) in the College's Millfield Building was furnished especially for the course along with a computer room. The students shared canteen and toilet facilities with other students.
- The College had employed one full-time and one part-time (6 hours) student support assistants. They assisted students in class as well as being available to give personal assistance and support as needed.
- The curriculum spanned two years and covered the following areas with an average of six hours per week devoted to each:
  - Adult Basic Education
  - Communications and Money Management
  - Information Technology and Use of Computers
  - Accessing Belfast/Independent Travel
  - Lifestyle, Community Action and Personal Effectiveness
  - Health
  - Basic Work Skills, Work Preparation and Team Enterprise
- A work experience placement was arranged for the students for three hours per week. These were mainly within College facilities such as canteen, portering and the creche but also with local employers.
- The National Skills Profile (Royal Society of Arts, 1997) was used to record the students' competencies in five areas: Communication, Information Technology, Numeracy, Personal Skills and Practical Work Skills.. The students' portfolios were validated in the usual way by external assessors at the end of the academic year.
- The students were transported from home to College and back. This was subcontracted by the College to a voluntary organisation which provides minibus transport for people with disabilities.
- Each student was given £33.00 per day to cover their lunches and outings.
- A Course Steering/Liaison Group had been set-up consisting of the Principal of the Special School, the former Head of School at BIFHE, representatives from the Belfast Education and Library Board, the Training and Employment Agency and Social Services.

## **COURSE EVALUATION**

The main method used to evaluate the course was through semi-structured interviews carried out in confidence by the evaluator (RMcC) or his assistant. These included individual interviews with six College lecturers and three support staff, all 14 students presently enrolled in the course, nine family carers, four teachers in the Special School and three members of the Steering Group.

Issues covered in the evaluation are summarised in the following box.

### ***Issues Addressed in the Course Evaluation***

*Parental Agreement.* Had their initial concerns been addressed?

*Transport from home to College.* Transport is provided from home to special schools and also for adults with learning disabilities who attend social service day centres. Should this continue when students enrol in FE Colleges?

*Who should the course be aimed at?* The existing course was established primarily for pupils with severe learning difficulties who had attended one special school in Belfast. Can College staff manage students who may have additional needs such as behaviour management problems or epilepsy?

*Relationship with Special School.* There are good arguments for maintaining a working relationship with the schools from which the students have come; parental confidence in College is increased and advice and assistance is available to College staff which provides a fall-back if the student has to discontinue attendance. How did this work in practice?

*Social inclusion.* The location of the College provides more opportunity for integration than does a segregated school setting. Were the students more socially included?

*Vocational training and job skills.* A key expectation is that the course would help prepare students for a job and avoid them becoming dependent on social services for their day-time occupation when they leave education. Was this aspiration realised?

*Accreditation of Learning.* There is a lack of suitable systems for accrediting the learning of students who have marked developmental delays. How appropriate were the systems used by the College?

*Supervision and support.* This group of students usually receives a high degree of supervision and support both at home and in special schools. This needs to be balanced by giving the young people more autonomy and responsibility if they are to become more independent. Can College attendance help achieve this balance?

## ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE COURSE

The main achievements of the present course are summarised here. These had the agreement of all the stakeholders who were interviewed.

- ***Students with severe learning disabilities can cope with courses in Colleges of Further Education.***

The students had a range of competencies within the SLD spectrum and one third could be classed as having high dependency needs.

Of the three young people who left the course, one had particularly difficult behaviours and he returned to the Special School while the other two did not consider themselves to be disabled and opted for a more vocationally orientated course within the College.

All the students could name at least one thing they liked about the course with few mentions of things they did not like. School staff commented that the course widened the options for young people and others mentioned the rights of these students:

*"The basic idea of opening further education at 16 years is excellent. It is a move from segregated to inclusive environments."*

There was widespread agreement that the College offered a wider range of opportunities and experiences than the Special School was able to do.

- ***The confidence of the students has increased.***

Parents and staff made particular reference to this. For example, a porter at College commented:

*"The students were very shy when they first arrived but now they are much more talkative. Their self-confidence has increased."*

- ***The students' learning has been accredited using the National Skills Profile.***

This appears to have been a very successful way of recording the students' progress. The young people were proud of their portfolios and they were able to list various skills which they had acquired during the course.

- ***The work placements had been a particularly valued and valuable element of the course.***

The work placements were commented on favourably by students and parents, all of whom were now thinking in terms of their son or daughter having some

form of job. This aspiration was shared by the young people themselves. All mentioned at least one job that they thought they could do and would like to do. However in the immediate future, seven students wanted to leave College to get a job while six wanted to stay on.

- ***The parents had been won over.***

College and school staff spoke of initial parental reluctance for their son or daughter to attend College. However all the parents interviewed spoke positively about the course, although some did recall initial reservations:

*"It was a big step to let N. attend BIFHE. In the beginning I thought it had not paid off because he seemed to miss his friends. Luckily everything has worked out OK and he now enjoys attending."*

The College had taken particular steps to build relationships with parents; e.g. coffee mornings, named member of staff for parents to contact, telephone contact, home visits, newsletter and involving parents in reviews of student progress. These were done in addition to the staff's teaching commitments and often in their own time.

- ***A multi-agency partnership has been built.***

At the end of the two years, the College has developed effective working relationships with the Special School, the local social services and the Training and Employment Agency. This is a commendable achievement commented on by all parties although they did make critical comments about the lack of effective relationships in the early months of the course.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This section identifies aspects of course which informants felt could be improved and outlines recommendations as to how this might happen.

### **School Links**

The College needs to continue to work in partnership with the special SLD school. This provided reassurance for parents, ensured continuity in the child's education and the sharing of expertise and resources. There is certainly a willingness from school and College staff to make this happen and good working relationships have now been established with the SLD school. However it was felt that College and school staff could usefully attend to the following:

- **Review the curriculum of the course and identify areas which could be strengthened or omitted (see below);**
- **Agree a common format for accrediting the students' learning, especially in significant areas;**
- **Identify the resources available in both locations and make use of both sites;**
- **Explore the possibility for sharing staff or staff exchanges.**

### **Travel to College**

College staff and school teachers, plus the young people themselves all aspire to the use of public transport. This not only makes them comparable to other students attending College but it opens other opportunities for them, e.g. work placements, visiting friends and attending leisure activities. However parents express reservations about their sons' and daughters' capacity to learn and the risk involved in using public transport if it is available. The increased cost to them may also be an issue. The following proposals are currently being implemented.

- **Training programmes on the use of public transport now feature in the curriculum in special schools and on the College course. The active participation of families in these should be encouraged.**
- **A skills profile has been developed for travel by various forms of public transport. This is used to assess the students' competencies and as a record of achievement. The goal is for students to be capable of using public transport prior to enrolling on the College course or by the end of the first year.**

### **Course Curriculum**

Although the informants were broadly satisfied with the curriculum, they felt that more emphasis needs to be placed on the use of public transport, work placements and job skills. Opportunities to access leisure activities and to develop hobbies and interests were also noted. Some informants noted that issues to do with sexuality and relationships also need to be addressed and others mentioned personal care and appearance. The teaching of certain academic skills may need to be better attuned to individual competencies. Subtraction was cited as a particular difficulty for certain pupils. Perhaps a way forward is to align these skills to functional tasks in everyday life, such as shopping.

All informants viewed job placements as a central element of the course. For this to happen the number of placement opportunities must increase beyond those



available in College and more resources may need to be put into supporting students 'on-the-job.'

This aspect needs to be planned in conjunction with the special schools who are actively organising placements for their pupils and with social services who have instigated supported employment schemes, either directly or in conjunction with voluntary agencies.

### **Recording Student Progress**

The National Skills Profile does seem to provide an appropriate means of recording the students' progress in the chosen areas. These should be continued and the Special School has expressed an interest in using them with their pupils prior to College. New profiles have also been introduced in 12 vocational areas such as horticulture and catering.

In addition to written records, it is important that individual reviews are held for each student, involving at a minimum, the student, a family carer and College tutor. Ideally their social worker and Training and Employment adviser might attend also. It is recommended that:

- **Each student should be assigned a personal tutor whose main responsibility is to identify their particular needs and ensure that they are met within the course curriculum.**
- **Student reviews should be held at least three times during the course – after the first term in year one, beginning of year two and prior to the end of the course.**

### **Integration of Students into College Life**

Although there were many favourable comments about the students sharing the same canteen facilities and socialising with other students, there appeared to have been few other opportunities for students to mix with their mainstream peers although this may have happened informally on some work placements. In particular, the students did not access any mainstream classes or join in any organised social or sport clubs.

It would be unreasonable to expect this to happen for all students with SLD on a regular basis but equally the College should provide the opportunity for it to happen for at least some people for some of the time. For example:

- **Having identified the talents and interests of the students, it may be possible to match these to existing courses and clubs in the College.**
- **New initiatives might be tried to further the students' inclusion, such as taster sessions in other courses, or 'buddying schemes.'**

### **Staff Development**

Although some of the College staff have extensive experience of working with young people with special needs this is not so for all the staff. Equally if these students were to become more involved in other mainstream classes, this would increase their contacts with College staff. Opportunities should be provided for College staff to develop their awareness of good practice with these students and to develop their expertise. This could be done through a mix of inservice training options and staff exchanges, for example, between special school and college.

### **After the Course**

Informants were concerned as to what would happen after the students had completed the two year course. They were particularly concerned that they should have options other than attendance at a social services day centre for people with learning disabilities. Among the options they would like to see available are:

- **Enrolment on other College courses which are vocationally orientated;**
- **Work training, for example through supported employment options or attendance at sheltered workshops or social businesses;**
- **Paid employment on a part-time if not a full-time basis;**
- **Structured leisure pursuits that would get them out of the home, meeting people and pursuing their interests. This could include voluntary work.**

It is pleasing to note that in September 1998 five of the six students progressed to fulltime courses in Further Education and one other has a mix of work placements and attending a day centre.

### **CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

The two-year course, the first of its kind in Northern Ireland has been welcomed by all the stakeholders involved and all are keen on its continuation. It is fully in line with international trends and government policy on social inclusion and equal access to education. The course is also a logical extension of the work that FE Colleges have been doing in the field of special educational needs. Twelve new students were enrolled for the year 1998/99.

Nonetheless as with any innovation, particular challenges are posed to existing systems which need to adapt and accommodate to change. In this instance the main threats which the evaluation identified were centred firstly around mechanisms for funding full-time special needs courses in Further Education; secondly, forming partnerships incorporating schools, FE Colleges and social services along with training and employment agencies; and thirdly, a constrained vision in education services in responding to the social, vocational and emotional needs of these students. These three elements will continue to test our educational systems in the coming years.

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