



Special Congress September 19th. 2008, Britannia Summary Report

Introduction:

The Voluntary Action Children and Young People's Teams hold a series of Congress events each year to engage with and ascertain how young people feel about what happens to them. This is then fed into the planning and development of services for those same young people and is fed back into schools via the School Council process.

This Congress was held for children and young people from the Special Schools across the City and involved 34 young representatives across all those schools.

The themes of the Special Congress were Individual Education Plans, Activities and Changes. Workshops were planned to explore these topics in ways which children and young people, with a range of additional needs, could contribute and feel comfortable in expressing how they felt. Staff from the Engagement Service and Champion for Children's Office facilitated workshops with a number of young people at each table; those with more complex needs were also supported by their school staff member.

In between each workshop some physical activity was planned and delivered by staff from Youth and Play Services to enable the young people to have fun and let off some energy in between the 'thinking' time. Ellis Warrilow also got them all singing the adopted anthem of the Congress: 'Everywhere you go...'

The members of staff from the Special Schools attending were also involved in workshops themselves, centred around Diversity and Transitions. These were facilitated by Vince Simpson from the North Staffs Racial Equality Council (Diversity) and Jayne Lowe / Geoff Catterill from Children and Young People's Services. (Transitions).

The aims of the event were to:

- ◆ Establish how young people felt about their Individual Education Plan
- ◆ Highlight which activities young people were accessing and those they would like to access / what prevented them
- ◆ Understand how young people feel about the possible changes in their lives
- ◆ Have fun while we explored these issues
- ◆ Feed all the comments / issues raised back to appropriate departments for consideration in their planning

In addition to the staff highlighted the Children and Young People's Trust Support Team attended and the Joint Area Review Lead Inspector was present and talked to both practitioners and young people.

A series of activities explored how young people felt about:

Individual Education Plans (IEP)

This activity focused on the process of the IEP and how young people felt about it and centred on:

Decisions – ascertaining who supported young people in setting their own targets; these were generally family, staff members or friends

Targets – finding out what their targets were about in terms of behaviour and learning. The responses ranged from practical tasks such as making toast and a drink with no help to improving learning like getting better at writing / spelling as well as emotional progress such as ‘help with controlling my temper’.

Changes – the young people were asked to identify any changes that had happened because of their involvement in the IEP. They were able to identify a range of changes including:

- ◆ ‘I can now talk with lots more pupils and I don’t feel left out’
- ◆ ‘I now take part in groups and sports and like science
- ◆ ‘I was asked by my teachers to be a classroom monitor, which gave me a lot of responsibility. This has given me lots more confidence in my lesson’

Feelings – being involved in the process raised differing emotions from happiness to anger to worrying.

Overall the consensus was that being involved in their IEP had been a positive experience which helped them develop a sense of responsibility, trust in others and more confidence. One young person however highlighted that they ‘don’t like change’.

Young people were also asked about which activities made them happy / unhappy:

Like doing – the young people were asked what kind of activities made them happy which provoked a wide range of responses across all curriculum activities and beyond. One young person said ‘I tell the teacher when I am being bullied – it makes me happy because the bullying stops’

Unhappy doing – similarly when young people were asked what makes them unhappy bullying was also mentioned – ‘I don’t like being bullied, it makes me feel really, really sad – it happens in the playground’ and ‘someone pulls my hair’ which may indicate that not all schools address bullying effectively. The rest of the dislikes were mainly around activities within lessons, e.g. ‘my most boring lesson is English’.

Activities in School and out of School

When asked about the activities they took part in young people identified a small range of activities in school that they like doing such as ‘I really like handwriting, it makes me happy’ but identified a much longer list of what they would like to do including gymnastics, cricket, go-karting, ‘go on trips to Birmingham’ and camping.

The Clubs young people go to when at out of school varied from Tae-kwon-do to Guides/Cubs, horse riding and ‘puzzles’ while one young person stated that ‘I don’t like to do much out of the house’. When asked what kind of things they would like to do out of school the list was similar but included some different activities like farming, cheerleading, working with animals and ‘sing club’

When asked to identify some of the things that stopped them from going to activities young people described some common issues like:

- ◆ Money

- ◆ Transport
- ◆ Family
- ◆ Lack of confidence/fear/being scared - stating things like 'too many children might be there' and 'gangsters'

Each young person was given a special wish that enabled them to think about what they would like to do if there were no barriers and who they would like to do it with. This gave them real scope to use their imagination and the responses demonstrated that:

- ◆ Go to the moon / design rockets / go to the planet Pluto
- ◆ Act on a big stage and on film / go to see a rock band / fly on an airplane as well as the more general ideas of fishing, horse riding, going swimming. However there were some lovely altruistic wishes such as:
 - ◆ 'my granddad to get rid of his cancer'
 - ◆ 'wave a magic wand and get rid of all the bad guys'
 - ◆ 'never be ill'.

The people they were most anxious to take with them were usually family or friends although one young person did say they would 'go by myself'.

Changes (Transitions)

In thinking about possible changes in the future young people were asked: 'when you leave school how might you feel?' the young people responded in a variety of ways from happiness, 'because it is a new start and someone is trusting me' to sadness, 'worried and sad that I won't see my friends again' and 'if you have fears you have no friends to help'. The majority of the young people had positive feelings about changes.

Young people thought they might talk to friends, family or teachers about those feelings.

- ◆ 'Nanny, she can help me with my fears'
- ◆ 'Dad, because mum reads and cooks and is too busy'
- ◆ 'Teacher, as he listens and talks to me about my future and career and that is very important to me'

When considering 'what do you think you will do when you leave school at 16?' young people talked about going to college to develop skills or working and identified some of the careers they might choose:

- ◆ Teacher
- ◆ Looking after children and young people
- ◆ Looking after animals
- ◆ Hairdressing
- ◆ Signing

We looked at how the young people currently get to school and how they felt about their method of travel. The majority travel by bus while others use taxis, a car, a bike or walked. One young person said 'it's too far to walk and the bus is quicker than a taxi'.

In general young people were happy with the way they got to school but 4 young people did express that they felt sad about how they got there.

When asked if the same person took them to school 10 young people stated they had the same driver while 3 others said they had different drivers. Most were happy with the situation, 'I've got to know the driver because it's the same driver', although there were some less positive comments:

- ◆ 'The driver is sometimes nasty'
- ◆ 'The driver says 'where are you going' not 'hello'

To try and gauge how young people felt about the prospect of new experiences we asked them how they would feel if they had to go to a new:

School – 7 said happy, 3 were worried and 4 said sad – 'depends if I like it or not'

Shop – 11 said happy, 1 said worried, 2 said sad and 1 said angry – 'I don't like to go to the shop on my own in case I get lost'

Park – 16 said happy, 1 said sad and 1 said worried – 'going to the park is scary because of all the people' and 'it would make me happy going to the park with my friends but mum and dad won't let me'.

Afternoon activities:

The afternoon activities were based around encouraging young people to explore their world, meeting people and asking questions about their lifestyle to diminish fear and remove the pre-conceptions that might be there.

Different cultures and their clothes – there was a display of items of clothing from different cultures that young people were able to try on and ask questions about. The young people really entered into the spirit of things with this one and there are some lovely photographs as a result.

'I have never touched any clothing that is foreign before'

Hinduism – young people were able to ask lots of questions about Hinduism and what it meant in terms of culture, religion and festivals.

- ◆ 'What happens at a wedding?'
- ◆ 'Is Hinduism like Islam?'

Muslim Culture – young people asked lots of questions about the traditions, fasting, prayers and wedding traditions.

- ◆ 'Have you been to Mecca?'
- ◆ 'Do you get hungry during the day when you fast?'

Adam and his guide dog provided an insight into what life is like when you have impaired vision. The young people were fascinated by the guide dog and wanted to know how he worked.

- ◆ 'How does it know where to take you?'

Evaluation:

When asked their opinion about the day and some of the activities nearly everyone said that it was very good / good and only one young person said they did not enjoy it.

When looking at whether they enjoyed looking at the clothes and other activities where they could ask questions and find out more the majority of responses were positive and just two young people stated that they did not enjoy it.

- ◆ 'It was nice and colourful' (the clothes)

Exploring whether the physical games with Youth and Play Services were appreciated nearly everyone had fun however there were a couple of less positive comments. (Some of the games involved a parachute and balls)

- ◆ 'I am afraid of balls'
- ◆ 'The parachute was a kiddie game'

Part of the day is taking information back to school and telling others about what has happened so the question was posed 'who will you tell in school about what you have done today?' Head Teachers/Teachers, children in class and school councils will all benefit from the attendance of the young people as they share what they have learnt.

Staff workshops

While the children and young people were occupied with their workshops the staff members (who were not supporting individual young people) took part in two workshops on:

1. Diversity and its impact run by Vince Simpson. This looked at the needs of young people from an equalities perspective and how this impacts on educational establishments delivering services. Focused on needs (disability and equality) and issues of diversity and cohesion.
2. Changes / Transitions run by Geoff Catterill and Jayne Lowe. This was focused around the process of change for young people within Special Schools and what barriers there were / what support there is in place.

And finally...

Thanks to all involved in the Special Congress: staff from all departments / organisations, the children and young people themselves and to all the guests.

It was a fun day that highlighted both the positive feelings that young people have around change and development and some of the less positive feelings around fear of the change process.

All these comments and ideas will be fed into appropriate organisational planning structures to ensure that the requirements of young people with additional needs are fully accounted for when changes are made. Schools attending will receive a CD of the full report to enable them to share it in assemblies, lessons and school council meetings.

Copies of the full report, with photographs and further responses from young people, can be found on the Children and Young People's Trust website and the website at Voluntary Action Stoke on Trent.

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