Leadership and the Learner Voice

Edited by Professor David Collinson

Volume 4

“A central principle of student voice initiatives is the notion of the proactive learner: an idea that fundamentally challenges conventional pedagogic practice.” (Collinson, this volume)
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Editorial Introduction, Professor David Collinson

Introduction

“The teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is taught in dialogue with students, who in their turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.”

(Freire “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” 1972: 53)

This collection of CEL research reports examines leadership and the learner voice in the UK learning and skills sector (LSS). Exploring the diversity of learner engagement practices in FE and adult learning, these six reports highlight the value of students’ increased and continuous involvement in their own education and in the organizations where they study. They demonstrate that enhanced learner engagement often produces positive outcomes related to student learning, quality improvement and sustainable organizational change. These research projects also reveal that listening to the learner voice can have important implications for leadership in the sector. Together, these studies reinforce the recommendations of UK policy makers who increasingly encourage the introduction of more extensive communication mechanisms that can facilitate student voice through feedback, dialogue and participation.

The impetus for enhanced learner engagement in the sector has come from the Foster review, the FE White Paper, the LSC’s Framework for Excellence and Learner Involvement Strategy, the QAA’s Improvement Strategy and the DfES’ “Personalisation” agenda. The recently announced government requirement to include two student governors on FE governing bodies exemplifies this growing concern to enhance learner voice in the LSS. CEL (2007) has also prioritised the learner voice as a key strategic commitment, instigating the ‘Leading the Learner Voice Awards’, which recognise learner leadership and celebrate new forms of student representation across the FE system. In promoting the learner voice, CEL has also hosted national conferences on ‘Leading Learners’ and for ‘Staff Student Liaison Officers’. This policy of learner engagement is now embedded in every aspect of CEL’s leadership development work (including all its programmes, advice to organizations, and joint ventures and partnerships (e.g. with the NUS)).

The six research projects included in this collection highlight a number of important policy implications for the sector, for CEL and for leadership both in theory and practice. The volume comprises two main sections. The first contains three reports that reveal the important contribution of learner voice initiatives to quality improvement in FE and adult learning, whilst the second consists of three reports that consider how such initiatives can inform equality and diversity programmes. This is the fourth in a series of CEL volumes designed to showcase research produced by “practitioners” in the LSS on important leadership-related themes.

The CEL Practitioner Research Programme

The CEL practitioner research programme enables practising leaders and managers in the sector to undertake research on highly relevant issues. It is the result of a personal initiative by the chief executive of CEL, Lynne Sedgmore, who was keen to encourage a community of “practitioner scholars” and to provide an opportunity for practising leaders and managers in the sector to undertake research on highly relevant issues. In the summer of 2006, the Lancaster research team launched phase three of the CEL practitioner research programme with a nation-wide tender process. This tender attracted an enormous response, thus illustrating the very strong appetite across the LSS to conduct research by the sector: on the sector and for the sector. From the 50 plus submissions, the evaluation panel selected 29 practitioner research projects (as well as 5 HE projects) and these were funded for the period, October 2006 to March 2007. The six reports published in this volume are drawn from this round of commissioning.

Research is central to CEL’s organisational mission. Concerned to enhance the inter-relationships between research, policy and practice, CEL seeks to increase the impact of research on leadership development and on sector policies and practices. Research impact can occur in numerous ways. By broadening the knowledge base of the sector research can inform policy construction and implementation. The findings of research may change organizational structures, cultures, resourcing or delivery. More subtly, they might lead to changes in understandings, attitudes or practices (Nutley et al 2000). Hence in many ways, research provides evidence-based knowledge that is useful and usable for those in the LSS.

A distinctive feature of the CEL practitioner programme is that those working in leadership and management roles within the sector conducted the research themselves. Research in FE and the LSS more broadly is still very much in its infancy. This research programme and the series of edited volumes emerging from it enable employees in the sector to develop a research “voice”, to participate in the setting of research agendas and to define the key themes for leadership. In doing so, practitioners are actively engaged as researchers in the process of knowledge production. During the six-month period of the 2006-07 research programme, two workshops were organised at Lancaster (one in November, one in February) to provide support, advice and guidance to all the researchers undertaking the research, in analysing the data, and in writing up the final reports. This process of strengthening a research community in the LSS by encouraging “practitioners” to become researchers constitutes a very important objective of the CEL research programme.

CEL created the practitioner research series with the intention that research can positively influence the sector and inform CEL’s teaching programmes. Equally, research engagement itself can constitute a learning experience, enhancing organisations and researchers’ own understandings and practices. The programme therefore seeks to foster the research-based skills and expertise of staff in the sector. By so doing, it is concerned to encourage the “research-engaged college”, a way of empowering staff and students through enhanced learning cultures to incorporate a virtuous circle of enquiry, critique and improvement into well-planned organizational
and personal development. This increased focus on research-based knowledge and experience is particularly relevant at the current time, as the UK government is keen for FE colleges to offer more degree-level/HF programmes. It is also particularly pertinent in terms of learner voice and engagement. Encouraging students to conduct research in their own institutions is an excellent means of enhancing their learning, development and participation in leadership processes.

Underpinning this CEL practitioner research programme is also the view that theory and practice are both very important and often mutually-reinforcing. Much of the debate about research impact focuses on the importance of “evidence-based” perspectives, but sophisticated empirical research should also be theoretically informed. Explicitly or implicitly, theoretical perspectives inform all empirical research. For example, in the area of leadership studies many theories concentrate on leaders themselves and the qualities and behaviours deemed necessary to be an “effective” leader. Meindl et al. (1985) criticised such leader-centric assumptions which tend to “romanticize leaders” by developing overly exaggerated views of what they, as individuals, are able to achieve. In contrast with mainstream approaches, post-heroic theories start from a different assumption; that leadership can occur at various hierarchical levels and is best understood as an inherently social, collaborative and interdependent process. Suffice it to say here, that theory and practice are best viewed as highly inter-related and the CEL research programme seeks to encourage mutually-reinforcing relationships between theory, development, policy and practice.

**Key Research Messages**

As we have seen, there is a growing policy emphasis on the personal and organizational value of learner engagement. Yet, there has been little research on student involvement in the LSS. To date, most of the research on learner voice has focused on school programmes (e.g. Fielding 2004; 2006; Smyth 2006; Hargreaves 2004). Accordingly, by drawing upon empirical research specifically in the LSS, the research reports in this volume make a timely contribution to current policy debates. They also raise significant theoretical questions about the nature of learning, about the nature of leadership and about the complex inter-relationships between learning and leadership.

A central principle of student voice initiatives is the notion of the proactive learner: an idea that fundamentally challenges conventional pedagogic practice. It is frequently taken for granted that education is best achieved through mechanistic and “McDonaldized” processes characterised by standardised “products” and clearly specified, predictable (and controllable) “learning outcomes.” However, as the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire (1972) has argued, these traditional forms of education tend to adopt a “banking concept of knowledge” in which teachers’ voices are dominant whilst students are rendered silent. In this pedagogy, teachers are assumed to be the active “experts” who “deposit” knowledge “into” passive students who simply receive, memorise and repeat the information. Treating students as unknowing “empty receptacles”, this pedagogy teaches learners to listen, accept and conform rather than to question, think critically and speak confidently for themselves. Learner engagement programmes fundamentally challenge such dualistic assumptions about the teacher as subject and the student as object of education. Re-thinking learners as co-producers and collaborators, as both subjects and objects of the education process, would seem particularly relevant and appropriate in the LSS, especially given that so many students are adults with extensive experience and knowledge themselves.

These contemporary ideas about learner engagement also fundamentally challenge traditional views about leadership. Conventional assumptions about tough, charismatic and dictatorial leaders would seem unsustainable in the context of collaborative learning. Here leadership is typically viewed as being less hierarchical and more collective, dispersed down and across hierarchies through fluid, multi-directional interactions and networks that transcend organizational boundaries. Underpinning this contemporary emphasis on “distributed” and “collaborative” processes is a conception of leadership that is deeply relational, facilitating the organisation’s continuous learning and productive potential through the empowerment of all its members. Such “post-heroic” ideas about the shared nature of leadership are very compatible with the new emphasis on learners as collaborators in educational practices.

Against this background, the research reports that comprise this volume present numerous examples of leadership and the learner voice in practice. Demonstrating that such initiatives include the strengthening of formal student representation by creating and sustaining student unions in FE colleges they also go further to reveal the diverse and sometimes less formal mechanisms through which learner voices can be articulated and encouraged. Within the LSS such voices have frequently not been heard.

Section A of the volume includes three research reports, all of which explicitly address the impact of learner engagement on quality improvement. In the first report, Dr Colin Forrest (LSC Yorkshire and the Humber), John Lawton (NIACE), Anne Adams (Sheffield College), Trevor Louth (Sheffield College) and Ian Swain (LSC Yorkshire and the Humber) examine the impact of learner voice on quality improvement. Their research in a large FE college documents a range of different approaches to student voice, including learners’ views on: teaching styles; assessment processes; curriculum development; resource development and links with industrial practitioners. The authors suggest that these approaches can enhance student engagement and relationships between teachers and learners, but they also warn that tensions may exist between using learner voice to support both the personalisation of learning and whole organisational improvement.

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1. It is increasingly common to highlight the “research-engaged school” (Handscomb and MacBeath 2003) which refers to schools that investigate key issues in teaching and learning using research for staff development, turn data and experience into knowledge and promote learning communities (Sharp et al 2006).  

2. For example, at City College, Norwich considerable progress has been made in enhancing student representation through its “re-launched” student union, training programmes and support for “idea reps”, and the “Student Parliament” (Richards 2006).
The second report by John Shuttle (Brighton and Hove City Council) explores learner engagement and its impact on decision-making within FE and adult learning. Based on a questionnaire survey and two detailed case studies, he identifies 8 key areas that contribute to the development of successful learner involvement in decision-making: a focus on learner ownership; strong relations between learners and staff; celebrating the learner voice; a clear vision; robust and continuously improving processes; organisational structures; making room for dialogue; and limiting the restraint of planning cycle boundaries. This study identified a clear demarcation between more mature organisations (which increasingly engage students at all levels of the institution) and those that merely inform or consult with learners. Shuttle concludes that learner voice needs to be embedded in all aspects of the organization, reinforcing a leadership model that is increasingly student-led.

In the third report, Ros Pilkington and Dave Eatock (Warrington Borough Council) consider the types of leadership needed to support learner involvement in adult and community learning (ACL). They explore the evidence for learner involvement at all levels in planning, delivering and evaluating adult learning and examine other local government and educational settings where service users are engaged. Their action research project with five local community-based learning groups found that leadership in ACL requires leaders who can engage a wide range of learners, staff, communities and interests. Whilst managers and tutors in direct contact with learners involve them whenever possible, more detached leaders do not always establish the mechanisms for genuine feedback, consultation and involvement. They conclude that ACL leaders need new skills, and greater understanding to cope with these challenges.

The research reports in Section B consider the contribution of learner engagement to improving equality and diversity. Rachael Diennan (Broke-On-Trent College) highlights the value of listening to the learner voice as a way of improving equality and diversity in an FE college. Focusing on aspects of race and disability in particular, this research found that many students were positive about the college and about its equality and diversity practices. However, learners also pointed to several areas, especially regarding disabilities, where practices could be improved. This “bottom-up” approach informs an action plan for improving equality and diversity in the College.

In the next report, Darrel Bate and Steven Sutton (Waltham Forest College) outline an action research project drawing on staff and student voices to develop a toolkit addressing the problems of underachievement amongst certain groups at Waltham Forest. Their research found that Black Caribbean and Mixed Heritage students (at both 16-19 and 19+) are underscoring in certain subject areas: Catering and Hospitality, Hairdressing, Health and Social Care and Electrical Installations. The researchers presented this information to students and curriculum managers, and on the basis of their responses outlined a set of proposals that could feed into the College’s Learner Involvement Strategy.

The final report by Andrew Coleby, Heather Pike and Richard Wales (Abingdon and Witney College) examines staff and student voice in relation to the spiritual and moral development needs of students with disabilities. This study develops a two-tier model of “formative” and “transformative” spirituality derived from a recent study of young people’s worldviews. The research findings suggest that the College is able to address the “formative” spiritual and moral development of their students. However, whilst opportunities to explore “transformative” spirituality are also available, these are not always taken up by students at the College.

Together, these CEL practitioner research reports on learner engagement highlight a number of key messages for the sector. All six reports present case study examples about the positive personal, organizational and leadership benefits of listening to students’ voices. They illustrate the diversity of learner engagement initiatives in the LSS and the importance of involvement, communication, feedback, dialogue and trust as preconditions for effective student participation in decision-making. The final two reports also highlight the potential value of listening to the staff’s voice. It is evident from all these research reports that enhanced learner (and staff) engagement has the potential to generate radical and wide-ranging organizational change and quality improvement.

These studies also point to some of the barriers to enhanced student engagement. They emphasise the diversity of terms used to describe these processes, such as: “learner voice”, “learner engagement”, “student involvement” and “personalisation.” Since these concepts may well have different meanings and can be interpreted in various ways, researchers suggest that greater clarification is required. Some reports indicate that performance pressures through “audit cultures” and excessive monitoring can reinforce the “distance” (Collinson 2005) between college leaders and learners. This may result in leaders merely paying lip service to student voice but such tokenism is likely to be ineffective (see Shuttle this volume). Equally, not all students have the confidence, enthusiasm or interest to participate in college processes. In such cases, it is very important that student voice initiatives do not facilitate the emergence of a powerful learner elite whose voices become dominant, thereby constituting a barrier to wider engagement (see Forrest et al this volume). Accordingly, there is a need for further encouragement and support for senior leaders to engage all learners more extensively in decision-making processes.

The research reports in this volume are also highly inter-connected with other key leadership-related themes. They link closely with the CEL practitioner reports published in “Leading Quality Improvement” (Collinson 2007a) and “Collaborative Leadership” (Collinson 2007b). For example, one of the “good to great” colleges researched by Alton et al identified listening to the learner voice as a key strategy in their quality improvement programme (Collinson 2007a). Similarly, Vasse found that teaching staff at one particular college are encouraged to undertake action research as part of a policy linked to the government’s current concern to “personalise” education and training for both young people and adults (Collinson 2007a). The underlining collaborative and partnership ethos of learner voice initiatives is very compatible with the findings of several HE CEL research reports, particularly those by Jameson (2007) and Briggs et al (2007). Briggs et al observe that, although 14-19 partnerships focus on the needs of young people, they are typically not included in the framework for collaboration, thus...
pointing to the potentially productive links between collaborative leadership and learner voice, where students are viewed as “collaborators in learning” (Newton 2007). Collinson and Collinson’s (2007) research on student voice and faith issues in the LSS overlaps with Bate and Sutton’s findings regarding the perceived value of more black role models for BME students.

In editing this volume, the original research reports have been condensed to enhance the overall integration and cohesion of the collection. Some of the original reports included extensive reviews, for example of the leadership literature and recent government policy documents, as well as presenting more detailed accounts of research methodologies and findings. In the interests of space, these sections have been edited down, most appendices have been removed and every report has been structured using a standard format.

References
Executive Summary
This study explores links between learner voice and quality improvement and is related to policy developments that have their origin in the FE White Paper, including the LSC’s Framework for Excellence, the QAIs Improvement Strategy Pursuing Excellence and the DfES vision for Personalising Further Education. Research findings draw on a range of case studies on different approaches to support the development of learner voice within a large FE college in the Yorkshire and Humber region. These included learners’ views on teaching styles and approaches; ownership over the assessment process and links with teacher feedback; curriculum development; resource development; links with industrial practitioners; and delivery styles. The research is also informed by outcomes from the launch of a learner panel in the region. The findings suggest that these new approaches can enhance student engagement and relationships between teachers and learners, but that tensions may exist between using learner voice to support both the personalisation of learning and whole organisational improvement. The leadership implications of this research are explored for learners themselves, organisational leaders and policy makers.

Introduction
This report contributes to work currently underway with NIACE, DfES and the LSC nationally to develop effective learner voice mechanisms to inform the planning and quality of provision. Recent policy developments, for example, the Foster Review (2005), the FE White Paper (DfES 2006a), and the Framework for Excellence (LSC 2006) suggest that the views of the learner are central to the quality assurance and improvement of organisations in the FE system. This represents an alignment with other public services where the “user” is placed at the centre of policy and practice and suggests a need to strengthen learner involvement at national, regional and organisational level by integrating learner voice issues into broader areas of both policy development and leadership.

At the organisational level, the Framework for Excellence is designed to take this forward as part of an integrated approach involving the dimensions of responsiveness, quality and finance. In the first dimension, organisations are expected to include “learners as active partners in a performance improvement process in which dialogue is continuous” (LSC 2006). This includes the expectation that learner involvement is continuous and embedded in the improvement process, learners can communicate their views using channels that can meet their needs and that there is a high level of participation in performance improvement and the representative processes.
The research questions that this study attempts to answer are:

- What are the most effective strategies or set of strategies that can be adopted to capture learner voice?
- What are the implications of learner voice for quality improvement strategies?
- What are the leadership implications of learner voice?

Research Framework

There is substantial international research going back over a decade related to student voice and, until recently, such studies were mainly located in the setting of compulsory education. McGregor (2006) highlights effective strategies for engaging students in school improvement activities and she draws attention to several areas that have been productive in developing the link between student voice and leadership. Central to this is the perception of students by their teachers. McGregor articulates an “adult v. kids” approach as a significant barrier to engaging students and suggests that philosophical as well as structural reform is necessary. This is reflected at the level of government too, as Miliband (2004 and 2006) also takes the notion of student engagement into the “day-to-day” processes of education.

Fielding (2004) examines the barriers that need to be overcome if student voice is to connect with organisational leadership. He draws attention to the dangers of speaking for, or on behalf of others. In his view, the transformation of the school into a community where there are collective and shared understandings of the policies and practices that impact on learning is a key to effective engagement. Rudd et al (2006) identify a continuum of learner engagement processes, from the management of a school keeping learners informed (e.g. through newsletters), to a more empowering situation where learners have an equal say in the form and style of their education. Hargreaves (2004) identifies nine “gateways” where learners could be involved: curriculum, learning to learn, workforce development, assessment for learning, (school) organisation and design, new technologies, student voice, advice and guidance and mentoring. Arguing that leadership has a role in ensuring that learning meets students’ aspirations, Smyth (2006) suggests an architecture that represents the minimum conditions for this to happen:

- Giving students significant ownership of their learning in other than tokenistic ways.
- Supporting teachers and schools in giving up some control and handing it over to students.

The National Learner Panel (NLP) first met in January 2007 with the brief to:

“give a greater voice to people on Further Education courses across the country ….. provide government with direct access to learners from a wide range of learning backgrounds, and ensure that the voice of the learner is reflected at a national level.”

This panel is intended therefore to link with and inform policy. The foreword to the LSC’s learner involvement handbook, written by the NLP suggests that the panel will also have a role in championing learner involvement as being central to “driving up quality.” A pilot regional learner panel was launched in Yorkshire and the Humber in March 2007 with a remit to complement the work of the NLP through a regional perspective. This includes the availability and quality of provision in particular areas; linking with key regional agencies but also being a forum to share good practice through, for example, bringing student governors or council members together.

The research focussed on a single FE college in the Yorkshire and Humber region to explore developments in using learner voice in a variety of curriculum contexts. This study took place against a background of rapidly developing national and regional developments and the research findings take account of this wider context. In March 2006, OISTED inspected the college where the research was conducted and a number of strengths significant for the research were noted, including:

- the breadth and responsiveness of the provision to a diverse student group and to employers’ needs,
- good academic, pastoral and personal support for learners,
- accurate self-assessment and quality assurance procedures which lead to improvement,
- very good promotion and monitoring of equality and diversity,
- highly effective leadership.

The college also has a significant mixed HE and FE economy allowing learner voice to be studied in a range of contexts.
Fostering an environment in which people are treated with respect and trust.

Pursuing a curriculum that is relevant and that connects to young lives.

Endorsing forms of reporting and assessment that are authentic to learning.

Cultivating an atmosphere of care built around relationships.

Promoting flexible pedagogy that understands the complexity of students' lives, and

Celebrating school cultures that are open to and welcoming of students' lives regardless of their problems or where they come from.

Nightingale (2006) describes another continuum that relates closely to the areas outlined above. She explicitly situates this within a changing power dynamic from organisation-led through “tokenism”, “consultation”, “representation”, “participation” to “self-managing”, where learners have effective control over decision making.

Such research begins to align closely the concept of learner voice with the developing personalisation agenda and the removal of barriers to learning. The DES (2006b) consultation defines personalisation as having the following characteristics:

- Responding to the needs of the whole person.
- Creating an ethos of seeking and responding to the views of the learner in ways that deliver an excellent, social learning experience in the subject(s), supporting employability and personal development.
- Responding to the needs of the local community and employers through flexibility in course choices, location and timetabling, innovative and appropriate uses of ICT and tailored approaches, such as Train to Gain.
- Raising the ambitions of all learners.
- Supporting every learner to become expert.
- Teaching and fostering the development of the learner's ability to negotiate with the teacher/trainer and achieve at the highest possible level.
- Encouraging individuals to take responsibility and giving them the approaches and tools they need to become independent.
- Fostering openness and trust, supported by robust systems where learners help shape services and comments and complaints lead to improved services in the area where they learn and in the organisation as a whole. (DES 2006: 8)

This policy of Personalisation makes explicit links with organisational improvement and is reflected in the QAs National Improvement Strategy (QIA 2007) through one of the priority actions.

Much has been written about improvement in educational settings, although the bulk of the literature refers to school contexts. The literature suggests that the two distinct, but not entirely mutually exclusive ideas of “effectiveness” and “improvement” need to be explored briefly in the context of developing personalised learning. In relation to educational effectiveness, Somekh et al. (1999: 25) introduce a comparative dimension,

“A more effective institution is typically defined as one whose students make greater progress over time than comparable students in comparable institutions.”

In this definition, progress is recognised by the use of quantitative measures linked to success rates and is also related to the measurement of retention and attendance information. The comparative element suggests the use of benchmarks in clustering similar institutions together. Implied in this definition of effectiveness is the concept of measurement where the achievements of individual students are aggregated to arrive at an indicator of institutional performance. This model has an emphasis on outcomes that are easily measured and aggregated. Wrigley (2003) questions whether effectiveness can be adequately defined only through those factors that are amenable to objective measurement. He also argues that it is impossible to separate these factors from cultural and contextual aspects that impact on the school and it is difficult to decide which are significant in defining a school’s effectiveness.

Hopkins et al. (1997: 8) define improvement in relation to “focusing on the teaching and learning process and the conditions that support it.” Here improvement is seen as a distinctly organic and dynamic process. This is reinforced by Hopkins (2001: 56) who differentiates between school effectiveness and improvement,

“...improvement being owned by an individual school and individual staff, a concern with changing organisational processes rather than outcomes, a concern to treat educational outcomes not as given but as problematic, and a concern to see schools as dynamic institutions requiring extended study rather than ‘snapshot’ cross sectional studies.”

It is within this tension that the context of developing learner voice resides and Hopkins’ definition identifies one of the central mechanisms for enhancing student voice, namely continuous and ongoing engagement rather than through summative approaches like surveys. There are hints that this tension may also exist in the emerging “Framework for Excellence” (QI 2006), which includes “responsiveness to learners” as a specific dimension to be measured. The ways in which the responsiveness dimension can be measured is under development but attempts to quantify this in practice are likely to prove challenging.
Research Methods

This project explored approaches linked to student voice and related them to the developing policy and theoretical contexts and was qualitative in nature. It comprised four elements: a literature review into student voice in the context of emerging policies; an audit of current practices in the case study college; and a number of action research projects to trial new approaches to accessing learner voice. Links have also been made to the concurrent development of a learner panel in the region.

The project was directed by a steering group. Membership included the Learning and Quality Director and the Research Manager from the regional LSC, the Regional Development Officer from NIACE and two members of the case study college: the Quality Manager and her deputy. The Learning and Quality Director and the Regional Development Officer had worked closely together on the launch of the regional learner panel. The two college representatives linked with the College's curriculum teams developing the methodologies for enhancing learner voice and reported developments back to the steering group. The steering group represented organisations with potentially contrasting perspectives which could have contributed to replicating the effectiveness/improvement tension outlined above. Individual members were quick to acknowledge this and there was a high degree of self-regulation within the steering group to reduce the possibility of interpreting the findings from a particular perspective.

The two research participants from the case study college were actively involved in defining and constructing which approaches were used to research the use of learner voice. Colleagues from the case study college were invited to submit proposals for projects that supported new activity in involving learners. Of the 11 proposals submitted, the following 6 were taken forward and funded through this research project:

- Redesigning the Performing Arts curriculum.
- Shaping assessment models on an Engineering course.
- Redesigning Animal Care provision.
- Improving course delivery in Vocational Hairdressing.
- Developing Key Skills delivery.
- Improving the Learning Resource Centre.

Funding was used for the release of teachers to participate and also to support the two research participants from the College in observing the activities in practice. For consistency, a schedule was used to record these observations, as follows:

- Composition of learner groups involved,
- How learners were involved,
- How staff were involved,
- How well the activity was working,
- Any barriers that might hinder activity,
- The degree of engagement of the learners,
- Other areas of interest.

The two research participants who observed these processes reported the findings back to the steering group. The other members of the steering group discussed the observations and evaluated the proposals, their implementation and the observations against elements of the research framework described above.

Two members of the steering group were actively involved in the establishment of the learner panel in the region. This experience has also been used to make a brief contribution to the research findings. The establishment of the regional learner panel incorporated an explicit requirement to address the development and training needs of the panel members. The panel was recruited against the same diversity framework that determined the composition of the national learner panel. This represented an attempt to identify a range of learners within the FE system in terms of:

- Age, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation and social background,
- Being inclusive of learning difficulties and/or disability,
- Representing the needs of Looked After Children,
- Level, type and duration of course including distance learning.

The research findings below are therefore informed by activities that relate to accessing learner voice from within organisations and also where learners are participating in panels interacting with regional and national organisations. The implications of these dynamics are explored in the concluding section of this report.

The researchers were also aware of the importance of "giving back" to research participants. To this end, an event has been planned within the case study college to share the emerging findings with the participants and to support the development of an understanding of how individual approaches can support wider developments. The development of approaches to access learner voice and subsequently to use the findings to make changes is liable to occur over an extended timescale. The researchers intend to use these further opportunities to discuss the activities directly with the learners who participated in the activity.
Research Findings

In order to glean learner voice, the College uses “opinion surveys”, conducting a facilities survey every 2 years and a teaching and learning survey each year. The former involves a 20% sample, the latter rather more. The College reports about 2500 responses to the facilities survey and up to 5000 to the other. All curriculum teams, levels, neighborhood centres etc are covered and the results analysed by curriculum team (for the teaching and learning survey only). local college (the college exists in three campuses in different parts of the city), and student characteristics including: level of study, gender, age, ethnicity, learning difficulty and disability, and mode of study. The findings and surveys are translated into Braille, large type and audio tape where necessary. A variety of community languages are also used. The methodology is simplified for foundation learners and those with literacy needs. A bespoke version is used for learners in community centres to enhance the usefulness of the survey. These approaches represent a summative and perhaps mechanistic approach to using student voice to inform improvement. The tools generate a “snapshot” overview and form a key part of evidence for self-assessment reporting. As such, they are more likely to inform delivery for subsequent cohorts of learners rather than influencing the contemporary situation.

The College’s teaching and learning survey uses the core questions and methodology, including use of the recommended correction factor from the LSC’s national learner survey. Data generated in this way are also retrospective but the approach allows for comparison with national benchmarks. In this context, last year’s responses for the College were higher than the LSC national mean for virtually every element. The College also uses a learner survey for higher education that is mapped to QAA requirements, with responses also being largely positive.

The College also uses a survey to capture the opinion of people coming to enrol. Online learners have their own survey, as do users of Digital Centre of Vocational Excellence courses. The College reports that all of these different methodologies have generated very positive responses. To provide contextual information, the College uses an annual survey of the parents of 16-18 learners, and an early learners’ survey. The latter is the only survey that is conducted by an external company with the remainder being organised by the College. The College’s Business Development Unit conducts an employer survey and surveys are also issued to parents who use the Nursery.

The survey information is complemented by the work of the College’s student forum. This begins to move the strategy for eliciting student voice into a potentially more empowering approach where influence may have a more immediate impact. Forums have recently been established at each local college site. The College reports that there is a variation in the degree of activity across these sites with some still in development. The Students’ Union is perceived as only just becoming properly active and representative again.

Many courses involve learners in the self assessment process by asking them to meet to complete a form developed centrally and circulated during team self assessment. This work has been used to lay the foundations for the more substantial involvement outlined in the College’s quality strategy. Some HE staff involve their learners quite extensively in a similar way. Such an approach has potential to align the use of student voice with improved performance outcomes.

Anonymous suggestions boxes are also used. This approach was piloted at one college site 3 years ago, and rolled out to all this year as part of the College’s Charter commitment. Student Services and Learning Resource Centres have had their own versions for some years. The College has a well developed complaints procedure. The Annual Charter meeting is used to make the procedure more accessible to learners and their advocates. Following such consultation, the procedure has been turned into plain English, for example, and methods of making complaints have been widened. The College also regularly accesses independent web forums to gain an understanding of the perception of the organisation and its provision. At one stage, learners had direct online access to the then new college Principal and this was used to submit complaints or to suggest areas for improvement.

The student support department has recently run a “Have your say day” where the findings from much of this summative activity have been fed back to students. This took the form of a celebratory event with an inspirational introduction from a young sportsman acting as a role model and a student-led performance. This was followed by feedback from the focus groups and further discussion. This approach proved to be powerful in raising the expectations of students to be participants in shaping their own learning and the environment in which it was taking place. There was also strong students’ union involvement in the event.

These were the main formal student voice mechanisms in place within the case study college. Many of these methodologies also link closely with those suggested in the Framework for Excellence to develop the students’ voice intervention in learning and to build mutually supportive relationships between learners and teaching or support staff in the College.

Performing Arts

The first agreed proposal from the performing arts team centred on the opportunities created for learners to contribute to curriculum redesign in the National Diploma Acting course. The timing of the intervention was critical in that the actors’ body were re-writing the course framework, giving learners the opportunity to influence what and how they would be taught. In this way the learner voice intervention enabled the learners to pursue a curriculum which was of relevance to them.

The performing arts team measured the satisfaction of learners with their current modules and overall course structure. Consideration was also given to the clarity of the assignment brief and the feedback form, an essential element in determining learners’
achievements on the course. The need for differentiated approaches in this aspect of course delivery was noted by the Curriculum Team Leader and was felt to be an area of some concern for learners. The approach used was to run three meetings with volunteer student representatives from the current learner cohorts, in years one and two. These meetings were minuted and then discussed at staff team meetings and formed part of the College’s attempt to negotiate teaching and learning approaches to enable students to achieve at the highest possible level. Previously, if learners had not fully understood their feedback from the assignment brief and had not known what to do to achieve a higher grade, there was the potential for learners to underachieve. The significant outcome for curriculum team leaders here was the need for formative assessment strategies to be used, rather than summative ones, and for learners to be supported in understanding the difference between these different approaches in order to raise aspirations and consequent achievements.

The questionnaire to elicit learners’ satisfaction with the current course structure, assignment brief and delivery received 49 returns from a possible 55, showing a good level of support from learners for the initiative. Learners were consulted about a proposal to introduce the notion of a “performing arts company” to support employability and personal development. Through the questionnaire responses and the discussions facilitated by the Curriculum Team Leader learners were able to voice their opinions on module content and the assignment briefs. Learners offered constructive criticism about teaching styles employed on their courses. All learner representatives were observed by the Curriculum Team Leader and the Quality Team Manager (who sat in on the session) as being enthusiastically engaged and all learners were considered to have made valuable contributions.

Engineering

In the engineering technologies department learners were invited to enhance their understanding of environmental issues in manufacturing engineering by receiving outside input on innovative approaches to “green” design considerations. Learners were invited to suggest ways of making more of environmental issues, including assignment briefs; to suggest alternative methods of assessment; and to help redesign assignment briefs for the next cohort of learners.

The Course Leader and Personal Tutor encouraged learners to consider their responsibilities to next year’s cohort of learners and to their chosen occupation, to be seen as environmentally responsible and ecologically aware. The Quality Manager who observed this session reported that there was evident mutual respect and trust established between staff and learner participants in the discussion reflecting, as Smyth (2006b) suggests, an environment in which positive relationships are established and by pursuing a curriculum which is meaningful and relevant to young people’s lives. Learners were observed as being very keen to be involved in such discussions and were pleased to have been asked their views on the topic.

One possible concern over the approach taken was that learners were selected to engage in these discussions on their academic ability. The degree to which students at other levels might be involved in similar discussions is a possible limitation to this approach, as it is unclear how the ambitions of all learners (DES 2006b) would be raised by adopting this selective approach. The extent to which more able students can represent the views of other learners is worthy of further consideration. In the case of the engineering students, for example, would their involvement be seen as representing the views of all or some of the learners on the course or merely be indicative of their own personal and active participation on the course?

Animal Care and Management

In Animal Care and Management, 6 full-time course groups were represented by individual students, elected by their learning peers, in a meeting with the Curriculum Manager. Issues which had been raised in individual tutorial discussions were put forward by the member of staff as agenda items in the learner representative meeting, covering such areas as admissions procedures, college experiences, aspects of learning, Learning Resource Centres and work placements.

The member of the Quality Unit of the College who observed the session reported that all 5 learner representatives were positively engaged in the meeting and made good suggestions for improvements including: learners working in separate groups; the introduction of a “buddy” system; and students producing a newsletter for prospective students.

Hairdressing

The fourth approach involved a whole course-group of full-time learners in NVQ Level 3 Hairdressing. While the backgrounds of each learner were different; some have progressed from entry-level courses or Foundation Studies while others have worked at relatively senior levels within the industry; the 12 students have bonded effectively to form a discrete group with its own identity and team spirit. The approach builds on the student representative model, with a minimum of three student representatives on each course group across the Hairdressing Department and this action research activity deliberately included opportunities for all learners to contribute to whole-course meetings to discuss course satisfaction and to contribute to strategic planning of the course for the following year. The course group was also to be challenged on the requirements that would have to be met to establish a Level 4 course to offer progression routes and to explore business opportunities for more enterprise activities in college. The minuted discussions with learners would also be complemented by their completion of satisfaction surveys for quality assurance purposes.

Having observed the first whole-course meeting, the Quality Manager considered this approach to be very positive. Most learners gave their views enthusiastically and contributed actively to discussions relating to course content and quality, assignment briefs and tracking of learner progress on course. Two students were observed as being quiet throughout the session and making few contributions and it was felt that this could have been addressed by directing specific questions or prompts to engage them more equitably in the discussions. Two other students were felt to dominate the
discussions to some extent, talking over each other and again the communication dynamics within the groups could be highlighted by the group being asked to set its own ground rules for engagement. The fact that this approach engaged all learners in a cohort is significant, in that this meant the department was in a position to hear all learners’ views, notwithstanding the fact that there may be some of the group who may need greater encouragement and motivation to participate than others.

The connection made in the Hairdressing department with raising aspirations, by getting learners to consider the effective design of a level 4 offer, is noteworthy in the debate on the importance of personalisation in learning. The course team had adopted an approach which helped create an ethos of seeking and responding to the needs of learners in ways that deliver positive social experiences and support employability and personal development (IDES 2006b). Getting students to vision what a level 4 course should look like raises their ambitions to study at this higher level, encourages learners to take more responsibility for their learning and offers them tools with which they can become more independent and self-managing learners.

Key Skills

The fifth approach involved students on a NVQ Level 2 Sign-writing course and focussed on their embedded Key Skills activities. Learners in this cohort had just completed a communications module, developing their speaking and listening skills and were moving on to a unit on “Working with Others.” In the nature of embedded key skills development, the course leader used the collaborative learning approach to provide opportunities for learners to discuss strengths and weaknesses of their course; to finalise an action plan to make improvements suggested by learners; and to promote a greater understanding amongst learners of lesson planning, schemes of work and assignment briefs. Significant outcomes of this approach were that learners were asked to design a good quality lesson from their perspective and to devise an exciting scheme of work for new learners.

The Quality Manager viewed this group as working effectively. The meeting was chaired by a mature learner who effectively directed discussions and only occasionally used the position of chairperson to dominate discussions. One potential issue was that learners were chosen by the staff member based on their aptitude and ability to communicate effectively in groups and whom he considered to be the most enthusiastic, engaging and innovative. This method quickly identifies those learners who might become “expert” (IDES 2006b) in their chosen subjects but is limited to a selected few. It could therefore be argued that the benefits of such discussions are accrued by a selected few rather than all learners on the course, the remainder of whom may have differing views and benefit only indirectly from this approach.

Learning Resource Centre

The sixth approach involved learners becoming more actively involved in using the College’s Learning Resource Centre. Utilising a focus group approach, but with attention being paid as to how remote learners can be actively involved in contributing their views, the senior leader responsible for the Centre developed an action plan so that the views of learners were built in to the planning cycle to cover the Centre’s core and developmental activities. The anticipated outcomes were that learners would be more interested in working as assistants in the Learning Resource Centre if they had opportunities to discuss and devise the role with staff and to assess the benefits for them through open discussion and dialogue. This approach illustrates the systematic way in which changes to the delivery of provision can be planned effectively with learners so that any concerns are addressed at an early stage and ideas from learners can shape a policy or operational change at an early developmental stage, rather than retrospectively ask for revisions once a new initiative had been put in place. In this way, learners were helping to shape and improve services in areas where they learn, having a direct impact on the work of the whole organisation.

Several of these approaches raise the issue of needing to be clear whether learners are acting in a consultative or representative capacity. This has influenced the development and instigation of a Regional Learners’ Panel in the region where the case study college is located. As part of the personalisation agenda and wider aspects of policy influencing the debate on learner voice, the LSC in the region were keen to establish a body made up of learners which could be approached for its views on policy reform and strategic considerations affecting the delivery, quality and planning of learning and skills activities in the region. A selection rather than election process followed a call for self-nominations from learners across the region, approached principally via their institutions. Selection took place through a series of interviews conducted by the Regional Development Officer of NACE and the consultants contracted to launch the Panel in the region.

The remit of the Regional Learners’ Panel makes it clear that learners are not to be appointed to represent their institutions or even other students on their courses, but to give their views as learners and to act as a sounding board or consultative body for agencies, such as the LSC, the Regional Development Agency, the Government Office in the Region and the Regional Assembly. This approach places a different emphasis on panel members’ accountability that would be characterised by a representative approach; an area that needs to be addressed as the relationship between the regional and national Panels is established.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Organisations working in the FE sector have been engaged with listening to learners for many years. Since the FE White Paper (2006) the degree of interest in this area has intensified and this has led to the simultaneous introduction into the public domain of several concepts such as: “learner voice”, “learner engagement”, “learner involvement”, “personalisation”, “learner satisfaction” and “responsiveness to learners”. The arena is becoming characterised by an increasingly wide vocabulary and if links to quality improvement are to be made explicit, then some consistency in interpretation is essential. This study has not attempted to define these terms and their relationship to each other, but it is important to acknowledge that the concepts may well hold different meanings to different elements of the leadership constituency. It is also possible that this vocabulary may well be linked to the improvement/effectiveness debate outlined earlier, where “responsiveness” for example is characterised by attributes that can be easily quantified, aggregated and benchmarked.
The different models used to develop learner voice within the college setting engaged students as “insiders”, where views are used in informing practice within an organisation in the FE system. The learner panel developments involve learners as “outsiders” to develop explicit links with government and regional and national agencies. The leadership audience for voice is therefore as diverse as the vocabulary that defines this area. Individual teachers and curriculum leaders are intended to take account of feedback, institutional leaders will be held accountable for their organisations’ responsiveness to learners and policy makers and further education planners will form part of the audience for regional and national learner panels’ views.

Learners therefore are expected, not only to engage with their curriculum, but also to adopt a reflective position in terms of articulating what their learning is like for them. This metacognitive approach relates closely to the search for “expert learners” as a key element of the personalisation agenda outlined above. It requires an appreciation that learners not only have to understand the process of learning but also the context of both where that learning is situated and the wider FE environment. This puts a responsibility on the leaders of organisations to support this understanding to develop and mature. Learners need not only to take responsibility for their own learning, but also to be personally supported in order to articulate their views. This will need to be taken even further where learners are involved in representative and advocacy roles.

In the case study college, a range of different approaches was used. It was clear that many of these engaged learners in ways that they had not encountered before. This did not mean that these approaches were novel in a national context, but the students participating in the case studies were being involved in ways that were new and interesting for them. This appeared to have potential to affect the formal hierarchy that existed between the student cohorts and the teachers and curriculum leaders that were participating in the research. They were learning together how to make things better and this appears to have had a very positive effect on student motivation and engagement. This also suggests that there are potential developmental needs for teachers as well as learners.

The findings indicate that conducting learner forums has greatest impact where teaching and support staff are prepared to be challenged; where there is a culture of listening to varying points of view; where staff are not over-defensive when negative criticisms are aired; and where there is a commitment from leaders to making something happen as a result of having asked for opinions. Some of the approaches could contribute to giving students some ownership over their learning; to establishing an environment in which people are treated with trust and respect and in cultivating an atmosphere of care built around relationships.

In situations where learners are elected by their peers rather than selected by their tutors, it is also important to note that this might be seen as a more democratic process and one in which tutors and institutions give up some degree of control to learners. The nature of the election process for learners raises issues about how learners are trained and supported to represent others, particularly if their own personal opinions and concerns do not match those of other learners. This approach does offer opportunities for enhanced participation which is a necessary pre-condition if learners are to become self-managing, with some degree of control over decision-making which affects their learning.

The concept of engagement is central to the DfES proposals for personalisation in the FE sector. This may suggest, however, a somewhat simplistic view of how learners participate in FE through a predefined “learner journey” Palmer (2001) has described “opportunist” and “unstable choosers” amongst learners who engage with learning until a better opportunity presents itself. Bloomer and Hodkinson’s (2000) longitudinal study generated a range of learner biographies that highlighted the influence of learner dispositions. These have the capacity to change suddenly or gradually and in unpredictable ways often linked to wider social, economic and cultural contexts. Bloomer and Hodkinson generate the concept of “learning career” where personal identity, values, appraisal of situations and aspirations all change, often rapidly and sometimes in a polarised manner. Certainly the new approaches introduced as part of the research suggested a high degree of learner engagement, but the implications for developing methodologies for accessing the voice of learners, whose aspirations and needs are rapidly changing, are significant.

This study has attempted to place mechanisms for capturing learner voice in the context of national developments in the field and in the wider context of policy developments relating to improvement. The research also highlights several areas for further development. As suggested above, a clear definition of terms and how they are used would support making any tensions between policy and practice explicit, and thus help to define the area of contested values and how conflicts may be resolved.

The findings suggest that empowering learners is central to enhancing learner voice but this raises a potential paradox: that of creating a powerful learner elite that could reinforce, not remove barriers to engagement. It is not merely the most clearly articulated voice that needs to be taken account of (McGregor 2006; Nightingale 2006). The DfES vision for personalising FE highlights that it is with the most disadvantaged learners that dramatic improvements in success rates can be made. Developing methodologies for listening to the disadvantaged is an essential area for further research and of great significance for both FE colleges and those organisations supporting the development of the national and regional learner panels. The research findings suggest that future developments in this area would be usefully complemented by exploring pedagogy for learners in the LSS that links learning to leadership, allowing learners to develop the skills to reflect on and articulate their needs and those of others.

Fielding (2006) constructed a four fold typology to address issues of leadership and student voice. His categorisation is significant when interpreting the research findings, especially in the context of “high performance learning organisation” and the “person centred learning community.” The former model begins to explore the links between leadership, voice and measurable outcomes. Here learner voice has a direct link to informing what makes better teaching and learning with a direct impact on success rates and performance. The latter model has negotiation and values at its centre with
outcomes being personal in nature and defined more widely than by just success rates. Research that explores the interface and boundaries between these two models in FE settings would enhance understanding of the power and accountability dynamics that have the potential to limit the impact of learner views in improving how and where they learn.

Acknowledgments

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References


Learner Involvement in Decision Making

John Shuttle, Brighton and Hove City Council Learning Partnership

“Through championing the voice of young people as both consumers and customers society becomes more attentive to individual need and thereby richer and more vibrant in its negotiations and decisions. It becomes, in effect, a more responsive society and in doing so not only enhances its capacity to be creative, but also in its capacity to gain and retain the allegiance of young people to social and political processes.”

(Fielding 2004b)

Executive Summary

This report explores learner engagement and its impact on institutional decision making within the FE and adult learning sectors. Based on a survey of 29 organizations and two detailed case studies, the report identifies 8 key areas that appear to contribute to the development of successful learner involvement in decision making: a focus on learner ownership; strong relations between learners and staff; celebrating the learner voice; a clear vision; robust and continuously improving processes; organisational structures; making room for dialogue, and limiting the impact of planning-cycle boundaries. The research found that many institutions are actively engaging learners in college decision making. Good practice was evident, for example, in learner voice conferences, learner awaydays, open evenings, and publicly that linked the learner’s voice to the institution’s response. The research identified a clear demarcation between more mature organisations and those that either informed or consulted with their learners. The most mature were increasingly engaging students at all levels of the institution. The report concludes that learner voice needs to be woven into all aspects of the institution, as networks of engagement, thus paving the way towards a leadership model that is increasingly student-led.

Introduction

This research project aimed to understand the various forms of learner representation that exist in Further and Adult Education institutions across the South-East and to determine what effect these practices have on the decision making process. In particular, the research addressed the following key questions:

- How effective are various kinds of student representation?
- How effective are various kinds of student representation?
- How are student representatives selected?
- How are student representatives selected?
- What means are used whereby actions discussed or taken are reported back to learners?
- What means are used whereby actions discussed or taken are reported back to learners?
- What mechanisms exist for measuring the effectiveness of various forms of student representation?
- What mechanisms exist for measuring the effectiveness of various forms of student representation?
- In what ways is the institution changed as an outcome of learner representation processes?
- In what ways is the institution changed as an outcome of learner representation processes?

Whilst it was recognised that student representation was by no means a new concept and that recent publications such as the FE White Paper (DfES 2006) and the Framework for Excellence (LSC 2006) clearly promoted increased learner participation, the question “What works and for whom?” still seemed to be under-explored. The report sought to examine institutions that had developed learner engagement to some maturity, to gain insights from their experiences that would inform future strategies. Certainly, learner engagement has recently been touted as good practice, but questions about how engagement actually affects the desirability of institutions remain largely unanswered. The research aimed to explore whether learner engagement went beyond keeping students informed, or was simply a tokenistic gesture designed to satisfy internal demands and external targets.

Research Framework

The recent FE White Paper recommends that learners should be more involved in decision making and sets the context for what is expected of institutions:

“We know that when learners participate in decisions affecting their learning experience, they are likely to play a more active role in the provider’s quality improvement process. Equally, the involvement of some learners can directly improve the responsiveness of the system to the concerns of learners more generally. We will encourage more learner representation in all aspects of the system from national policymaking to course content and delivery.”

(DfES 2006a 3.11)

Colleges and training providers are expected to develop and implement strategies for involving learners (and parents/carers of younger learners) to play a role in institutional governance, with each institution appointing at least two student governors. There should also be opportunities for students to feed back levels of satisfaction so that colleges and providers can make improvements. Work undertaken with both the LSC and Ofsted shall ensure that effective feedback mechanisms are reflected in institutional development plans (DfES 2006a 3.12).

Recently, Bill Rammell has articulated the beginnings of a vision for “personalisation” in the FE sector (DfES 2006b) that aims to move from “good to excellent” by “working in partnership with the learner – to tailor their learning experience and pathways, according to their needs and personal objectives – in a way that delivers success.”
Harkin (2006) conducted a survey aimed at students accessing part-time FE. His findings based on student focus groups indicated that “being treated like an adult” was most valued by students. He also noted that, when working with student participants, it was difficult to get students to talk about their views and concluded that students were unused to being asked about learning issues by authority figures. Student voice is about true democracy within institutions and may be subverted by the focus on institutional performance. The potential for distorted “achievement thinking” has been pointed out by David Marquardt (2004), the former Labour MP. He observes that constant attempts to measure performance can have the effect of undermining democratic processes.

However, within this environment, themes of citizenship such as student voice emerge. Institutions appear to be operating somewhere between two conflicting objectives: one which is focussed on directives that accord success for meeting targets, and the other based on aspirations to enhance community by allowing each student the possibility to be heard, work in partnership with college staff and towards mutually agreed aims. These tensions need to be distinct, and are acknowledged, defined and incorporated into this research to attempt to identify frameworks that are more closely aligned to the democratic cause. Recognising that the basis for distinction may be realised through a greater understanding of the functional and personal domains inherent in student voice, the most appropriate theoretical approach that informs this research is that developed by Fielding and his colleagues.

Research Methods

The research project aimed to collect information about the present learner involvement activity in colleges in the South-East through a mainly qualitative survey, which also acted as an instrument for identifying and selecting institutions that had developed good practice for later interview. The project was conducted by a single practitioner/researcher with the support of an external consultant. In order to achieve breadth, a list of organisations was compiled that included not only FE institutions, but also adult learning colleges. In total, 180 organisations were surveyed and 29 responses were received (16%). Because of the relatively short timescale for the project, the key aim of the questionnaire was to capture a brief overview of the learner involvement activities of each institution and to identify the impact that any activities might have on the organisation’s decision making. Reflective thinking at the time indicated that a shift away from specific and quantifiable questioning would offer a better view of present practice.

A further assumption was that, as interest was beginning to build around the topic, there would be a range of activities that encourage reflection, discussion, dialogue and action that primarily concern students, but also, by implication school staff and the communities they serve” (Fielding 2004b). His work is strongly influenced by the Scottish philosopher Macmurray (1933) who believed that “the self only exists in the communion of selves”, that there are two kinds of relations we have as persons. Our encounters with other persons are either functional or personal in nature. Functional relations are those that concern doing in order to achieve our purposes, whilst personal relations concern helping us to be through our relations with others, and through mutuality, openness and honesty and include, for example, friendships. For Macmurray, there is interdependence between the two modes of relating with the functional being for the sake of the personal, Fielding augments Macmurray’s thinking by arguing that the functional is also transformed by the influence of the personal and is expressive of it. Fielding (2006) introduces a four-fold typology which is described later in this report.

Whilst personalisation is not truly within the scope of this research, it is a concept adjacent to learner engagement and to some extent, whether it may or may not flourish is firmly within the context of democratic learner engagement.

From a survey of literature and through internet searches it was evident that the topic of learner involvement had not been researched extensively in the post-16 sector. In Scotland, the HM Inspectorate of Education reported the position of student representation with regard to quality assurance in 2002 and explored the topic more widely in its aspect report (HMI 2006). In England, a paper (QCA 2004) produced by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) explored and summarised work carried out by the LSDA citizenship post-16 project (QCA 2003) and took the view that students had an entitlement to representation in their institutions.

Within the previous work carried out in England and Scotland on learner involvement, most emphasis is given to examining the extent and benefits of these practices. All the findings indicate that institutions and learners alike gain from increased learner involvement, but what does not appear to be clear is how any institution wishing to engage learners more in decision making might select the most appropriate methods and develop learner engagement strategies. The topic is complex, has much to do with the very specific characteristics of institutions and of their learners, and there appears to be no “one size fits all” approach. Recently, CEL has shown strong support for learner representation and has demonstrated a determination to work with the NUS and other partners to embed learner representation in FE institutions (CEL 2007). Learner involvement has been the subject of much discussion over the last 10 years and particularly in the schools context. Smyth (2006) highlights the power distance between young learners and many institutions and argues that this leads to resentment and hostility among students and to “not team” type choices. He suggests that institutions foster caring relationships that enable students to speak back and take ownership of their learning.

Fielding (2004a, 2004b, 2006) writes of a “new wave” student voice which “covers a range of activities that encourage reflection, discussion, dialogue and action that primarily concern students, but also, by implication school staff and the communities they serve” (Fielding 2004b). His work is strongly influenced by the Scottish philosopher Macmurray (1933) who believed that “the self only exists in the communion of selves”, that there are two kinds of relations we have as persons. Our encounters with other persons are either functional or personal in nature. Functional relations are those that concern doing in order to achieve our purposes, whilst personal relations concern helping us to be through our relations with others, and through mutuality, openness and honesty and include, for example, friendships. For Macmurray, there is interdependence between the two modes of relating with the functional being for the sake of the personal, Fielding augments Macmurray’s thinking by arguing that the functional is also transformed by the influence of the personal and is expressive of it. Fielding (2006) introduces a four-fold typology which is described later in this report.
Determined not to repeat previous research and confirm the already proven case that learner involvement was good practice and to be encouraged, the original aims of the research were reviewed. What emerged as particularly intriguing was the nature of the process that had occurred in the more mature organisations to shape their present learner voice practices. The concern was that implementing learner involvement strategies may not just be a matter of following functional practice, but that implicit in the journey towards greater engagement new issues may arise and need to be resolved. The opportunity to approach two exemplars enabled this project to explore the nature of the pathway that any institution wishing to develop learner involvement might follow.

To attempt to grasp what the journey towards maturity entailed, research interviews were designed that took to some extent a historical view of the development of learner involvement within the institution rather than focus on the present good practice. In addition to the data gathering achieved through the survey and interviews, a literature search explored the most contemporary thinking and practice. As the research was mainly phenomenological, and aiming to describe experience and practice, theoretical constructs were sought to offer a context in which to classify the findings, and as a basis to develop conclusions.

Research Findings

Twenty nine institutions completed the questionnaire. Of these, 10 were returned from adult learning organizations including LEAs, and 19 were received from FE colleges. The response represents 16% of the total sample, but contained many of those organisations already known to have developed good practice.

Learner involvement activities

The survey responses demonstrate the wide diversity of learner involvement activities that are undertaken and as shown in the chart as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complaints/suggestions process</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student representatives</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction surveys</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students governors</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus groups</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutorials</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student council</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student forums/conferences</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student committee(s)</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student union</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student executive</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student reviews of courses</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsletter/website</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality improvement meetings</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results suggest that many institutions had grasped the importance of learner involvement and had taken steps towards handing leadership to their learners, especially through student representation, the appointment of student governors and through focus groups.

Use of student’s charter

Most (72%) used the student’s charter to explain the possible ways that learners may take part in college decision making activities. Of the others, 14% intended to incorporate student representation into the charter and the remainder had no plans to do so.

Representative selection and support

The most common method used for representative selection was through election (62%). Of those remaining, 10% either selected or invited students to become representatives. In all responses, students were informed at the beginning of the academic year at induction, and a third of respondents employed posters/newsletters to attract learners into the election/selection process. All FE institutions supported student representation by assigning either a services manager or student liaison officer to support the activities. In 3 of the responses, the function was carried out through the principal’s office.

Institutional levels of representation

The survey demonstrated that representation existed at various levels within institutions. The majority tended to report that representation existed at institution level, i.e., through student councils and governing bodies, but this was also supported by course or programme representatives.

Maturity of participating organisations

Arnstein (1969) develops a “ladder” with 9 rungs showing the various levels of citizen participation. In the UK similar frameworks have been prepared notably by Hart (1997) for the participation of young people. For the purposes of this research, the spectrum of engagement developed by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) is employed. This is based on only 5 levels and is deemed to be more appropriate for categorising institutions in terms of their degree of learner engagement. The diagram below is based on this framework and from other guidance ( pudd et al. 2006) shows both the levels and the criteria used by this project for classifying institutions. The model spans the entire range of participation from institution-led to student-led.
Future plans

Examining respondents’ plans for the future, 52% (15) were improving participation by introducing more representatives, focus groups etc. but within the same group classification, 17% (5) were making plans that would raise the level of engagement by one level. All these were from the “consult” group. A further 17% planned to review their existing procedures and the remainder (from the middle two groups) had no plans to improve or review practice.

Is the learner’s voice taken seriously?

Although all institutions responding to the survey were at different stages on the “learner empowerment” journey, all indicated at least a desire to encourage student voice and reflect back what had been heard. Noticeably absent were organisations implementing learner participation practice that could pass for tokenistic activity and in many of the institutions lower down the scale of empowerment, there were several cases where the will of the institution was clear but impeded by a lack of enthusiasm by the students to take on representation roles. The assumption arising from this observation is that this initial resistance is a natural aspect of change as institutions attempt to transform through learner empowerment and perhaps based on students’ perceptions of the institution and of themselves in relation to the institution – that it is, perhaps, a resistance against a fear of the institution’s perceived power.

Other evidence of the learner’s voice being taken seriously is the actual areas of change in which the institutions aim to engage their learners and the actual changes that have taken place as a result. The information shown on the following chart is encouraging as it shows that the wide range of areas in which the sample surveyed had successfully involved their learners:

Using the criteria shown on the right of the chart, survey responses were analysed and mapped against the scale accordingly. Although some institutions engaged learners at a high level of the decision making process, only one had empowered learners to take high levels of control that could be identified as being learner-led. However, 14% (4) of institutions had developed learner engagement to varying degrees of collaboration. The two institutions that most highly demonstrated good examples of learner involvement in decision making are described in detail as case studies later in this section. The next group (inform) included 28% (8) of respondents whilst the penultimate group (consult) contained the majority 48% (14) of respondents. Only 7% (2) were classified as belonging to the last group (invol). The results demonstrate a high-level of student engagement across the respondent sample. However, because the respondent group represents only 16% of all organisations approached, it cannot be concluded that the results reflect the general position across the South-East. The findings indicate the emergence of institutions that appear to work in partnership with learners and demonstrate that they listen to students and reflect the decision making process back to students so that learners feel that they are “heard.”
Another view: a four-fold typology

The discovery that two distinct groups appeared to emerge from the data matched against the maturity model has some resonance with a typology prepared by Fielding (2006) that classifies school organisations. The table below is derived from Fielding’s work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal-functional relationship:</th>
<th>Impersonal organisations</th>
<th>Affective communities</th>
<th>High-performance learning organisations</th>
<th>Person-centred learning communities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristic:</td>
<td>Efficient</td>
<td>Restorative</td>
<td>Effective</td>
<td>Morally and instrumentally successful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student voice:</td>
<td>Restricted consultation making present arrangements more efficient</td>
<td>Listening. Closer understanding of those involved</td>
<td>Broad formal &amp; informal consultation making present arrangements more effective</td>
<td>Broad formal &amp; informal engagement to enhance development of “wise persons”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data indicate that many organisations belonging to the lower participating groups tend to be within Fielding’s impersonal classification, based on the limited consultation activity. Those belonging to the higher groups are contained mainly within the high-performance classification and several, particularly of the two selected case studies, having attributes that would indicate a leaning towards becoming ‘person-centred’ institutions. (Note: ‘person-centred’ in this context is not to be confused with the same term employed by Carl Rogers, the educationalist & psychologist).

An understanding of Fielding’s typology is instrumental to making the distinction between the use of student voice to meet performance targets (high-performance) and achieving performance through the use of student voice to challenge management considerations; yet still embracing notions of performance, but as the result of, inter alia, more student-led engagement (person-centred). This difference is subtle, yet essential for setting out plans that are in the spirit of learner empowered schemes of engagement. The key characteristics of leadership within the person-centred organisation are:

Effectiveness of student representation

Prior work (e.g. Somekh et al 1999) outlines FE college effectiveness in line with rates of retention and achievement. Exploring effectiveness in terms of this study required a new paradigm which accepted that formal performance measures are important, but that in the learner empowered environment, other measures exist which arise from students’ own formulations of what effectiveness means for them. Based on this finding, the view now taken here is that each institution must aim to work in partnership with students to develop models of effectiveness that are owned by the students and institution alike and that reference both internal and external definitions and measures of effectiveness. Another finding is that the more the institution moves up the scale towards empowering its learners, the greater the opportunity for clearly defining models of effectiveness that are owned by all and the greater the potential for meeting the jointly agreed targets.

Impact of student involvement on institutional changes

All respondents reported various institutional changes that had taken place as a result of learner involvement. The results vary considerably, but most reported the following (parentheses contain actual numbers of occurrences): changes to courses/curriculum (5); accommodation (5); induction/enrolment procedures (3); constitutional changes/strategic planning (3); changes to supply contracts (3); staff appointments (2); and changes to student handbook/prospectus (2). There are clear distinctions between the changes reported by the first and last two groups. Institutions belonging to the “inform” and “consult” groups tended to report more functional changes such as procedures and resources, and the “involve” and “collaborate” groups tended to report more constitutional changes such as strategic planning, planning staff appointments and the arrangement of supply contracts.

Student feedback

A range of feedback instruments were reported and included posters, newsletters, annual reports, email/website, tutor groups, and via governors and student councils. Again a very clear demarcation was identified between the first and last two groups. Those institutions classified as implementing strongly-participative schemes included feedback mechanisms enacted through student councils, via governors and through student representative attendance at tutor groups. The lower participating groups reported mainly the use of posters, email/website, newsletters and tutor groups not attended by student representatives.

Governing bodies

Of the sample, 80% had established a governing body within their institutions and all were from the FE group of institutions. The remainder included LEA-led adult learning services. In all cases, the governing body met at least three times (i.e. termly) over the year, with over half meeting 4 times or more per year. Those institutions graded higher on the scale tended to report student boards and committees that were affiliated to governing bodies.
College’s strategic plan. In the preceding December, tutorials and induction experiences were further specific topics (as well as matters like smoking, car parking, trips, catering, and social events).

Such discussions offer a chance to air views of all kinds and at all levels. As well as considering car-parking and the price of food in the refectory, the results of these exercises do have significance beyond just domestic matters. So, in addition to a cost-comparison exercise involving the nearby supermarket café, the College’s academic board had discussed the “feel safe” aspect of the Every Child Matters agenda, only a day prior to this interview. This had arisen because a college-wide 92% positive response on that topic level had one area with only 76% of the total possible response. The board had explored why this discrepancy might be, and what to do about it. Student members of the board suggested targeted sessions in safety and security as one step.

As well as student presence on the academic board (amounting to 2 members: the chair of the Students’ Union and the student activities representative), general corporation governance is closely tied-in to learners, with 2 of its membership total of 18 being the chair and vice-chair of the Union.

Finally, the College highlights a number of spin-off benefits for learners in some of these activities as well, for instance regarding citizenship, and debating, discussion and critical thinking skills. There ... it could be for other institutions to develop their own practice significantly in addressing the issues of learner voice.

Case Study B: FE College

This institution’s response to the questionnaire provided the clearest example in the project of good practice by a ... LiaisonOfficer and an Enrichment Officer, with the Student Liaison Officer acting as the link to the College’s SMT.

(Adapted from Fielding 2006 pp.307)

Interview findings: illustrative case studies of good practice

Case Study A: FE College

This institution is genuinely eager to determine what its learners think of, and especially what they want from the College and its offer. The College ethos is underpinned by an assumption that students must have “ownership”, and that a valuable feel-good factor depends in part on establishing that. This is also particularly important because of the local context, with both an employment-rich local economy and significant alternative local provision of post-16 education and training options. Thus, taking learner voice issues seriously helps the College’s “competitive edge.”

The College feels that there is no point in gathering views unless there is proper response, and especially in taking appropriate actions arising from them. Thus, there is always follow-up, through meetings and materials, confirming issues and establishing the responses and outcomes: “You said.../We’ve done.../This is how it has made a difference...” It is worth noting that where issues connect directly to matters of learner retention or staffing, there certainly can be explicit, if sensitive, appropriate intervention.

Conventional approaches such as 6-week evaluation forms are employed, but more dynamic methods also appear. A key feature is the annual Student Voices conference, linked to a broader annual Review Day, with teaching suspended for course review work. This event uses the College’s lower concourse; a large space, where 6 members of the SMT, a governor with a particular brief for child protection and Equality and Diversity matters, and other key relevant staff sit at themed tables (e.g. for Equality & Diversity, resources, and so on) to hear from learner representatives in all nine curriculum areas. The College aims for up to 100 learners to be involved. This year the total was around 70. Topics explicitly addressed in the December 2006 Learner Voices Conference included Information Advice & Guidance, timetabling, Equality and Diversity, Interactive Learning Technologies, enrichment and the student input into the College’s strategic plan. In the preceding December, tutorials and induction experiences were further specific topics (as well as matters like smoking, car parking, trips, catering, and social events).

Such discussions offer a chance to air views of all kinds and at all levels. As well as considering car-parking and the price of food in the refectory, the results of these exercises do have significance beyond just domestic matters. So, in addition to a cost-comparison exercise involving the nearby supermarket café, the College’s academic board had discussed the “feel safe” aspect of the Every Child Matters agenda, only a day prior to this interview. This had arisen because a college-wide 92% positive response on that topic level had one area with only 76% of the total possible response. The board had explored why this discrepancy might be, and what to do about it. Student members of the board suggested targeted sessions in safety and security as one step.

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Finally, the College highlights a number of spin-off benefits for learners in some of these activities as well, for instance regarding citizenship, and debating, discussion and critical thinking skills. There ... it could be for other institutions to develop their own practice significantly in addressing the issues of learner voice.
The LSC’s handbook (LSC 2007) received towards the end of this research project is a strong move towards offering supporting guidance, drawn from good practice examples and for providers wishing to improve learner involvement within their institutions. Guidance such as this is to be welcomed, but however useful this may be to those institutions wishing to embark on developing learner involvement strategies, the clear focus is on practice in a very prescriptive manner, and less so on the relationships between staff and learners: This research has clearly identified that fundamental to true learner involvement is the need to create trusting relationships, regardless of whatever practice is put into place, so that learners feel valued, feel free to express their opinions and concerns and are actively encouraged to take ownership for decisions affecting the institution’s plans and activities and for the well-being of staff and students alike.

The research also shows that learner engagement is an activity that takes time to develop. It is not simply a matter of organisation, of engaging student liaison officers and student councils. It requires... their way of making a contribution, dialogue is student-led, and students themselves are engaged in decisions such as “what makes a good lesson?”

This more significant learning experience is based on dialogue and self-reflection and the recognition that ultimately staff... and leads to a greater shared understanding of what it means to be a student or tutor within the same institution.

College A was identified as belonging to the higher end of the penultimate “collaborate” group, and College B belongs to the “learner empowered” group, and thus very mature organisations in terms... making. It is immensely encouraging to note the degree of close working in both institutions between staff and learners.

Success Areas

Drawing from the survey returns, the case studies and through desk research, the following areas of success were derived (Note: no order of importance).

1. A focus on learner ownership

Institutions demonstrating the greater overall benefits in terms of learner involvement in decision making had increased aspirations for learner ownership, allowing for leadership to develop through their learners. A notable difference between those institutions that consulted with, or simply informed their learners, and those that attempted to collaborate with, or empower their learners, was that the former had difficulty attracting learners to become representatives. The clear underlying theme is Wherever possible, “co-production” between staff and learners is the principle most valued in the College – along with developing two-way trust, on which the students have come to place great emphasis. Learners are involved in strategic decision-making, on matters such as finance, estates, the College’s own quality forum and preparations for inspection. Several compelling examples of the College’s practice are worth outlining. One is the annual away-day, involving the Student Liaison Officer and Principal alongside learner representatives. This mirrors the College’s staff INSET days, not only in date but also in focus. For example, recently there were sessions exploring and establishing what the College’s core values were or should be, and this was developed in the same manner by the learner awayday group as by staff groups.

Another example is the development of the College’s learning model. This agreed outline cycle of effective teaching and learning was distributed around all staff, and posted up in all classrooms and training areas. It was written in relatively academic language for professionals. The Student Liaison Officer then worked through it with a group of learners to “translate” it into a simpler and more learner-friendly version that not only laid out the cycle, but explicitly sought the active engagement in that cycle of the learners who read it.

A third example, linked to the preceding one, is of developing learner involvement in the College’s system for the observation of teaching and learning. Selected learners have been paired with staff for training by the College’s Quality Manager, and then observe together as well, in sessions agreed with the (volunteer) staff. This is done in another curricular area from that of the learner to minimise risks, and includes the ability to opt out of the feedback stage. This example is part of a planned transformational college aim to “move from good to great” in all respects over the next few years. In particular, the College is looking for a “surge” in the field of learner voice and representation. This is apparently in part because of a perception that “other colleges are beginning to catch up.” Such a vision of continuous improvement – led by key staff and shared by all staff, and perhaps crucially also by learners, based on past experiences of committee commitment to the principle of “co-production” – is something towards which the sector is being moved, as part of the concept of self-regulation.

Finally, the College would refute any view of learner voice and representation as being a luxury. It sees a solid business case for learner engagement, being a business founded on customer satisfaction; and this is seen as one way forward in satisfying customers further down the line, such as employers, the LSC, the government and the taxpayer.

Conclusions

These are difficult times for the post-16 FE and Adult Learning sectors and institutions must increasingly demonstrate that they are meeting targets within an environment under almost constant change. In many cases these are operational concerns, of running colleges efficiently, of attaining achievement levels or implementing quality improvement schemes and of doing this within a climate of increasing budgetary constraints. In the contemporary environment, the pressure for colleges to perform can have the effect of distancing learners. The LSC’s handbook (LSC 2007) received towards the end of this research project is a strong move towards offering supporting guidance, drawn from good practice examples and for providers wishing to improve learner involvement within their institutions. Guidance such as this is to be welcomed, but however useful this may be to those institutions wishing to embark on developing learner involvement strategies, the clear focus is on practice in a very prescriptive manner, and less so on the relationships between staff and learners: This research has clearly identified that fundamental to true learner involvement is the need to create trusting relationships, regardless of whatever practice is put into place, so that learners feel valued, feel free to express their opinions and concerns and are actively encouraged to take ownership for decisions affecting the institution’s plans and activities and for the well-being of staff and students alike.

The research also shows that learner engagement is an activity that takes time to develop. It is not simply a matter of organisation, of engaging student liaison officers and student councils. It requires more than collaboration and is nothing less than what is described elsewhere as the development of a “radical collegiality” (Bragg & Fielding 2005) where students are encouraged to become policy leaders, researchers of their own institution, leading enquires, and therefore helping to shape institutions according to student perspectives and perceptions. In this approach, tutors listen to students to inform their way of making a contribution; dialogue is student-led, and students themselves are engaged in decisions such as “what makes a good lesson?” This more significant learning experience is based on dialogue and self-reflection and the recognition that ultimately staff and students are on a shared journey of discovery that aims to dissolve boundaries and leads to a greater shared understanding of what it means to be a student or tutor within the same institution.

College A was identified as belonging to the higher end of the penultimate “collaborate” group, and College B belongs to the “learner empowered” group, and thus very mature organisations in terms of developing learner participation. Each institution demonstrated a high degree of close partnership working with learners, and an eagerness to employ the learner’s voice in corporate and other decision making. It is immensely encouraging to note the degree of close working in both institutions between staff and learners.

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that greater success is possible when the institution encourages and empowers its learners to take ownership within corporate decision making.

2. Strong relationships between learners and staff
Several inter-personal themes were indicated by the research, particularly of trust. This was clearly apparent from the more mature organisations and strongly implied that the establishment of trust was essential to assuring the development of good learner participation practice. Other themes that emerged from the actions of those demonstrating good practice included: a clear respect for the learner's views; a willingness to be open and honest about decisions and plans; a clear desire to be aware of the difficulties that learners may have in expressing their views; and to act sensitively in order for learners to feel confident that their voice was important. In several of the institutions where these personal values had been incorporated into the college's ethos, there were fewer reports of difficulties attracting learners to engage i.e. as representatives. These findings suggest that this emphasis on good interpersonal relationships between staff and learners can dissolve actual or psychological barriers of authority, hierarchy or separateness and help forge truly collaborative partnerships.

3. Celebrating the learner voice
Many institutions are demonstrating good practice venturing beyond tokenism and taking actions that would actively engage learners in celebrating their support for or ownership of, college decision making. These activities were evident in the form of learner voice conferences, learner awaydays, open evenings and publicly that linked the learner's voice to the institution's response as, for example, in the first case study where the institution celebrated student voice through its "You said – we did – this is how it made a difference" message.

4. A clear vision
Although difficult to ascertain from the survey response but more apparent from the interviews, several of the more mature institutions showed that they had developed a vision for learner representation, often re-stated in their student's charter. In College B, the highest performing organisation of the sample, the vision of learner ownership had not only been set high in the first place, but is still being urged forward to push the boundary from "good to great." Whilst many institutions had developed good practices, it was sometimes hard to ascertain the underlying vision. Several stated their vision in terms of "what we shall do ... what you can expect from us" type statements connected to student voice. The implication is that the student's perception of their own empowerment is influenced through strongly laden messages promoted through the institution and not simply through articulating student involvement processes in handbooks.

5. Robust and continuously improving processes
Across the entire sample, there was a clear demarcation between the more mature organisations and those that either informed or consulted with their learners in terms of the learner participation processes which had been implemented. The survey analysis revealed a great richness of discrete activities that contribute towards developing learner participation. However, in the two case studies, wider and more encompassing process frameworks emerged, whether these existed as extensive participation-feedback models or innovative and ambitious process frameworks. This was especially evident in College B where a teaching and learning process cycle had been implemented.

6. Organisational structures
Although most of the responses had identified various student representation roles and groups, those that demonstrated the most maturity towards developing the learner voice within their institutions had moved, or were moving towards, systems of representation that connected the activities and linked the results of these activities to various points within the main organisation structure and particularly at board level. The conclusion is that learner voice should not act as an adjunct to an institution's activities, but needs to be woven into all aspects of the institution, not hierarchically but as networks of engagement, thus paving the way towards a leadership model that is increasingly student-led. Put simply, it is a matter of students engaging at all levels of the institution.

7. Making room for dialogue
Fielding (2004a) considered the role of "dialogue and its spaces" in student voice. Those institutions that had created close partnership working with their students had produced various opportunities to engage with their students leading to greater spaces for dialogue. These were not just physical spaces, such as student discussion areas, or arrangements such as conferences, but became evident through more inter-personal arrangements such as "open door" policies and how the institutions had articulated perceptions of relationship to their students. A good example of this was found in College B where one form of relationship was expressed as "co-production." The open expression and definition of these more metaphorical spaces are clearly important if learners are to feel that they can claim ownership in decision-making and are encouraged by shared values of trust, honesty and openness.

8. Limiting restraint of planning-cycle boundaries
Developing student voice is no less than developing a culture of engagement and commitment and, whilst business cycles must be accepted as a necessary part of running government, to constrain learner engagement exclusively to these cycles has the effect of hindering what should be a natural development. The key to this is a longer view, which embraces the need for the essential CPD activities that span longer periods of time and the focus on cultural changes that evolve continuously.

Recommendations
In relation to encouraging institutions to take steps towards learners adopting a greater leading role in the decision making activities of their institutions, this project has highlighted the importance of inter-personal factors. Learner engagement is not simply a matter of implementing involvement practices as though from a cookbook. This research suggests nothing less than placing the responsibility on institutions and students alike to aim for renewal through working together, and to support the
development of “good citizens” aiming to make a valuable contribution to society. It is also the basis for promoting true democratic change within education, and in wider society.

The work of Fielding and his colleagues on student voice has identified the need for key changes within schools. Similar changes should now occur in FE and adult learning institutions. The post-16 sector however differs in several ways to schools. The majority of students are either young adults or rapidly approaching adulthood and perceptions of self and other may not be the same as for those of school age. These students are striving to find their place within society and do so during a time of life where their own identities are taking shape. Those who return to FE or adult learning do so because they are seeking a renewal within themselves, either for very personal reasons or driven by the wish to make a different contribution to society. These are extremely sensitive and under-researched concerns.

For reasons of brevity, the study surveyed and interviewed only institution leaders or those in charge of student activities. Although the research has uncovered much useful information, perhaps most important of all it has identified that the students themselves are the better source of research. This project thus fell into the same trap as perhaps many institutions easily might; that leadership was something carried out by a management team of principals and staff. From the findings of this research it is clear that the views of students and the tutors who work closely with them must be sought and that this information would yield very personal narratives of what it is to be a student within their institution, what it is to be a tutor, what they feel they would want to say, what stops them saying what they might say, the way they would like things to be, and towards fostering mutual relations with tutors and other staff. An understanding of these narratives contributes towards identifying the characteristics that promote successful dialogue and assures that the student voice is truly heard.

The recommendation of this investigation is therefore to encourage further research that examines the perceptions, feelings and aspirations of learners and of their closest colleagues in their learning endeavours; their tutors. This type of research would need to be conducted sensitively and where confidentiality is assured and would aim to gain a proper understanding of what it is to be a student, what it is to be a tutor and to identify from the wide range of narratives, what perspectives that have been formed of inter alia self, self-tutor, and self-institution. The information gained from this investigation is crucial to forming ideas about the relationships that are developed which lead to positive transformations cherished by students and tutors alike and aimed towards greater learner empowerment, and ultimately greater improvements within institutions. New practices can be devices of change imposed by organisational leaders within institutions, and not by students. Such devices can constrain the learner’s viewpoint to what can be said and what cannot. Further research can inform the development of guidelines that focus more on the building of shared values and new relationship styles which encourage all students to engage, building confidence to express their voice and aspire towards ownership of all aspects of institutional decision making.

Acknowledgments

Mike Cooper for support and insight and a valuable contribution to the project.

Principals who cannot be named for reasons of confidentiality who offered their precious time responding to our survey and taking part in interviews for the case studies.

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Developing Professional and Community Leaders to Maximise Learner Involvement in Adult Community Learning

Ros Pilkington and Dave Eatock, Warrington Borough Council

Executive Summary

This report explores the types of leadership needed to support learner involvement at every level in adult and community learning (ACL). Leaders and managers in ACL believe that they are learner-centred and that they fully embrace learner involvement. The report explores the evidence for learner involvement at all levels in planning, delivering and evaluating adult learning and examines other local government and educational settings where user services are engaged. The focus of the action research was a consultation exercise with five local community groups or community based learning groups. The research findings suggest that leadership in ACL needs to involve learners and communities as well as staff and colleagues and requires leaders who can actively lead and engage a wide range of people and interests. Whilst managers and tutors in direct contact with learners involve them wherever possible, strategic planning and leadership does not always establish the mechanisms for genuine feedback, consultation and involvement. Arguing that ACL leaders need new skills and greater understanding to cope with these challenges, the report concludes with a set of recommendations designed to develop professional and community leaders to maximise learner involvement in ACL.

Introduction

This project was designed to build on the work of Warrington Learning Partnership to research the voice of the adult learner and that of non-learners by exploring the methods which work best in identifying the learning needs and preferences of those already engaged in learning and adults who have not engaged with adult learning opportunities. The project was also concerned to discover how these methods can inform the wider consultation agenda for Warrington Borough Council.

ACL is informal, often part time, offered locally to adults through a Government funding stream from the LSC. Much of this funding stream, though not all, is directed through local authorities. This funding stream has now ceased and has been substituted by funding for Personal and Community Development (PCDI). At present, the term “adult and community learning” is still often used as shorthand to describe this type of provision. ACL provision in Warrington is organised by the Council and all provision is commissioned or “contracted out”. The provision is mostly targeted at the town’s inner wards and includes traditional learning for pleasure courses as well as short programmes for personal and community development. The strength of partnership working was commended in the ALI inspection Report of November 2007.


Much ACL work in Warrington, as elsewhere, is achieved through inter-agency partnerships. The Warrington Learning Partnership is one such example, and it is the Learning Partnership that has spearheaded research into the leadership skills and consultation techniques necessary to ensure that the voice of the learner is heard. The Partnership is multi-agency, hosted by Warrington Borough Council, part funded by Cheshire and Warrington LSC, and it aims to be inclusive. Any organisation with an interest in learning in Warrington has the right to be represented at the Board and to send delegates to work on the subgroups. The Adult and Community Learning subgroup (ACLUS) has decided over the last three years to research the location, style and demand for informal adult learning in the town, to contribute to the Partnership’s ambition to be able to justify the claim that Warrington is a “Learning Town – where knowledge goes to work.”

Leadership in this context is therefore complex. The leadership of the Partnership, leadership in jointly agreed multi-agency tasks and learning provision, and leadership of the local council’s funded work in adult learning, are all intertwined. This can be beneficial, but may also lead to problems of responsibility and accountability. It is therefore helpful to take the opportunity afforded by this research project to analyse the models of leadership employed and recognised in adult learning contexts.

In ACL, as in many other fields, leaders use a combination of leadership styles and techniques to achieve results. These may range from directing others, through coaching and supporting, to the delegation of day to day responsibilities, and decision-making. In local authorities, the elected members set the priorities and vision, and delegate to professional officers to turn these into everyday opportunities and services for local people, expecting a high rate of reporting and accountability in return. As adult learning is either a highly individual experience or a collective activity with a specific purpose for a community, there tends to be an additional dimension of direct accountability and responsiveness added to the traditional democratic processes, which, arguably, may not be as necessary in the delivery of some other council services. This has led to specific approaches to leadership in adult learning which demonstrate attempts to involve others, not only employees and stakeholder organisations, but also the end users, the learners. Furthermore, there is a longstanding concern for those people, the overwhelming majority, who never use contact or express an opinion on adult learning opportunities that they have funded through their taxes, and which have been offered on their behalf.

There has been little formal research work specifically on leadership for and in adult and community learning. NIACE has provided guidelines and practical support to ACL in understanding the roles and tasks of leaders and has more recently begun to analyse leadership in the sector. They have also worked in partnership with FPM, a training organisation, to develop short programmes, “Managing better” and “Leading Adult Learning”, which now form part of the support and development offer from CEL. These programmes contextualise theories of leadership and management for the ACL field. CEL also encourage ACL staff to join other development opportunities offered to the post-16 learning and skills sector. A survey by the LSDA (Pearson 2003), to ascertain the leadership and management needs of all post-16 learning and skills providers, found that the greatest need was in ACL. Watters and Casey (2007) explored whether there is a shared understanding of leadership in ACL, and how this related to theoretical models.

These developments have been welcomed by the field, but limited access to such opportunities remains an issue, particularly in small authorities, due to the workload and financial constraints found in very small teams. This problem may be more readily addressed by larger institutions, focused on learning and skills such as colleges. Against this background, the following project planned to:

- Review and report on leadership and management styles in ACL.
- Review and report on community consultation and learner consultation approaches available.
- Analyse learner feedback and other approaches already used by Warrington Borough Council/Learning Partnership.
- Inform the review by involving existing learner groups and existing community groups in active discussion.
- Provide a consultation toolkit that can be adapted for any organisation working with adult learners.

Research Framework

The idea that end users of public services should be actively involved in the development of our public services has become central to the public policy debate in recent years. The Local Government White Paper “Strong and Prosperous Communities” (2008) sets out the Government’s ambition to “reshape public services around the citizens and communities that use them.” The White Paper specifies that this approach is about giving people choice and consulting them and involving them in the running of services. Without sustained local involvement there is the danger that individuals and communities will get the service they are given rather than what they want or need, and the opportunity to reshape local provision appropriately will be lost. The provision offered is also likely to provide poor value for money and be poorly supported.
A model of the hierarchy of user involvement has been developed by a community “Drugs Action” team in Croydon. The team developed a toolkit for the involvement of service users through a five level matrix, as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>Getting information (Being told what is available) at individual level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>Giving information (feedback to service by user) at individual level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3</td>
<td>Forums of debate such as focus groups and workshops at service level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4</td>
<td>Participation where users are involved in shaping policies and strategies and have a strategic role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 5</td>
<td>Partnership where users decide which policies and approaches need changing at a strategic level.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When this matrix is applied to adult learning, it is clear that many providers successfully give information and take feedback from learners, and that learner forums and stakeholder consultations are increasingly common. However, participation in strategic development and true partnership working appear to be much less prevalent. Wanington seems to be a typical example of this, with regular learner surveys and questionnaires, some learner forums, a learning “Stakeholder” group and some outreach staff. However, learners are not involved in the whole cycle of planning, delivering and evaluating adult learning, though they may sometimes be engaged in parts of it. There is no mechanism to enable learners to understand and comment on the big picture, other than through elected members. The part time, changing nature of the learners in ACL, with individuals dipping in and out as they weave their personal path through a variety of learning opportunities on offer make it difficult to organise for a group of “expert” learners. As well as the practical difficulties of organising a system for a constantly changing, part time group of learners, there is the danger that the “expert” will be perceived by others as “council favourites”, “self appointed busybodies”, or find themselves sidelined by the services and professionals that they seek to support, or the learners they seek to represent.

The National Learner Panel set up by the Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education in November 2006, held its first event in January 2007. This body intends to influence learning policy at a national level. The Panel has set out some essential attributes on the drive to embed learner representation in an organisation’s culture. These are:

- A dedicated senior manager acting as learner liaison officer.
- In ACL this role is clear. All managers and tutors have considerable contact with learners. Clarify for learners might be improved by designating one named person.
- An independent learner committee or student council.
- This is more easily organised in a large college with many learners on-site for whole blocks of time, or even full time, than in part time, geographically scattered adult and community learning. The panel emphasises the importance of allocating staff to support such a group.
- An established mechanism for involving learners in review processes, including inspections.
- Again, ACL has a long tradition of this practice and learners usually know that they and their learning needs are the most important focus of inspection, rarely holding back with their views and experiences when they meet an inspector.

Helping learners to develop the expertise and confidence to take part and to become “expert” learners is perceived by the panel as a crucial element of any learner involvement strategy. Again, ACL is well versed in such strategy and practice, but its adoption and effect is often patchy. The learners’ panel states that “Learner involvement is as much about the culture and values of an organisation as it is about procedures and responsibilities. Providers who have achieved in this area have stressed how critical senior leadership has been to the success of their learner involvement activities.” The panel reinforces the view that, like learning, learner involvement is a journey and that providers should start small, plan carefully and ensure everything works well before trying new approaches to learner involvement.

Best practice in teaching and learning enables learners to be involved at every stage of the teaching and learning cycle in which they are engaged, and in every stage of the planning and review cycle for their learning provision. Every good tutor involves learners in their own learning. The use of RARPA (Recognition and Recording of Progress and Achievement in adult learning) has reinforced this practice, making it even more explicit to both the learner and to anyone else who may wish to see evidence of the learning process such as the provider or an inspector.

RARPA has been formalised by the LSC to ensure that all learning is explicit and is clearly evidenced, thus ensuring quality learning experiences for all adult learners, wherever and however they learn. Much learner feedback is obtained through consultation, some by comparison benchmarking, particularly against other areas or providers, or by responsiveness (i.e. measuring success against the levels of recruitment and participation). There is an expanding range of tools available to test learner feedback, set out in a handbook from NIACE/LASDA (2001) focusing on listening to learners.

Technological advances have continued to broaden the possibilities. The range includes:

- Questionnaires and surveys,
- Complaints and Compliments systems,
- Invitations to submit written responses through leaflets, other direct mailing or online,
The most difficult voice to hear is that of the non-learner who may have decided that the learning on offer is not right for them, not meant for them or that they are not allowed to access it. A negative earlier experience of learning, often in school, may have created barriers to learning. An even more difficult scenario for leaders in adult learning is feedback from adults who have no idea that learning opportunities are offered locally and may be aimed at them.

Most learning providers decide to prioritise whom they consult. This usually involves current learners, stakeholders and may be on general or specific issues, and on a regular or infrequent basis. Many developments are around the development of a learner charter, and the LSC, in its current strategic priorities, emphasises the role of entitlement in shaping the volume, content and style of the demand-led provision it prioritises. This mostly refers to employers’ demands, and those of a world class 21st century economy, but it also includes the demands of individual learners.

Warrington Learning Partnership (WLP) has been working for some years to hear the voice of the non-learners in Warrington’s adult population as well as those already engaged in learning, or wishing to be. There was much interest in learning and in what learning opportunities might be offered in the town.

Against the backdrop of the Lyons Report and the Local Government White paper, Warrington Council is renewing its approach to customer feedback and consultation this year and has carried out a range of activities, including:

- Consultation on customer feedback,
- Questionnaires to a citizens panel of 1000 residents,
- Training for staff from every section of the council in designing feedback questionnaires,
- Similar training for those planning to carry out focus group work with local residents,
- The Council is planning a consultation toolkit to support employees and further training opportunities for staff. This will be in the context of a new consultation strategy currently in preparation.

All these mechanisms and strategies are deployed by learning providers contracted for ACL in Warrington and they are shared as best practice with local organisations who are not funded through the Council.

The main emphasis of all commentators is the need to communicate outcomes and decisions to those who have contributed to the process in a timely and appropriate way. Practitioners such as community development workers emphasise that the best way to hear the voice of the learner is to work alongside individuals, groups and communities rather than to ‘consult’ them, developing joint plans and evaluating success together. This is a long-term process.” (Senior Council community worker in Warrington)
The division of the Council that includes adult learning had added questions about learning to its survey of the citizens’ panel on satisfaction levels in terms of leisure and cultural facilities. A working party has been established in this specific section to develop and spearhead the Council’s approach to community engagement to pursue its ambition to develop safer stronger communities.

This action research project enabled a small piece of work to contribute to the development of the wider Council strategy for consultation at an early stage.

Research Methods

The project planned to interview six local groups. These would be three groups not actively involved in learning activities but who regularly came together for community activities of some kind. They could be expected to know their local community and something of the needs and aspirations of local people, both generally and in terms of adult learning. A local community development officer was asked to carry out this part of the research. In addition to his knowledge of the local communities and representative groups, the worker also regularly engaged in action research and many groups were accustomed to, and accepted this additional role.

The other three groups targeted for consultation through the research project were community-based learning groups. These were contacted through existing neighbourhood learning projects funded by the Council. These groups have experienced facilitators who could help to explain and support the action research process. These three groups were to be consulted directly by the main researcher in her role as the Council’s Lifelong Learning Officer so she would be known to all participants as the voice of the Council and a supporter of the learning in which they were engaged through both funding and advocacy.

Preparation for the action research included discussion about impartially and working with community research participants. It was strongly felt that impartial engagement was not only difficult, but undesirable in this type of research. The researchers are known to all the participants and have built up long-term ongoing relationships. This level of trust and understanding was deemed crucial to the conduct of the research, not only in saving precious time, but also in the research being seen to be part of normal engagement and consultation activities, as expected by community groups.

Further preparation involved consulting other council staff who are engaged in restructuring the Council’s approach to community engagement, consultation and feedback, in line with the emerging recommendations of the Lyons Report. This was then consultation with the stakeholders in adult learning about the purpose, scope and methodology of the action research.

Once the initial research questions had been developed, they were tested with the ACL Learning sub group of WLP. Members suggested some useful amendments and additional questions. The mid-year review meeting of all organisations delivering adult learning in Warrington through a contract with the Council provided an additional opportunity to test the questions before they were discussed with the groups. The annual Stakeholder conference in March 2007 was planned to form part of the action research in both addressing the research questions themselves, thus becoming a rather large consultation group in the process, and in receiving and commenting on the early findings. The conference is traditionally attended by any group or individual who feel they have a stake in adult learning. This may include learners, past time tutors, representatives from community centres and groups, special interest groups and all organisations subcontracted by the Council to deliver learning including voluntary sector agencies, the two local colleges and some small private providers.

The results of the consultation with the Stakeholder conference gave a comprehensive overview of learning opportunities in the town, how they are funded and a range of consultation and feedback mechanisms currently used, or having the potential to be used with communities and individuals. The conference responses, though more knowledgeable about funding streams, offered no greater insight than responses already received from the community based groups. However, they did offer support for the views already expressed.

The project deadlines limited the number of groups that could be consulted to five out of the planned six, with the additional input from the Stakeholders conference. The group chairperson or facilitator in the case of established learning groups was contacted in the first instance and asked to canvass the group’s view on their participation. No group refused to participate and the process was often perceived as a normal part of the contact with the researcher in their more customary role. The researchers were careful to fit round the groups’ planned activities so it proved impossible to visit all six groups in the time allocated.

The proposed questions were distributed in advance of the visit. Each visit took about an hour to an hour and a half and, for the most part, finishing the discussion was more difficult than initiating it. A total of forty-eight people participated. The interview discussions took place during February 2007, and the groups were: Fairfield (6 males, 2 females), Longford (6 females, 2 males), Latchford (8 females, 4 males), Otabo (15 males and females) and Fairfield ICT (3 males, 3 females).

The researchers recorded responses on flip charts in order for views to be read during the discussion and to initiate new thoughts from participants. Where a group facilitator was present they recorded the session. This was discussed with each group who did not perceive any problems.

The record of each visit was sent back to each group for comment before analysis by the research team. No changes were suggested. The researchers’ initial views on the experience were that the groups were very well informed and clearly articulated their own views, and possibly those of some in the wider community. The decision to hold
was a great deal of discussion on ways to learn and a clear emphasis on sharing experiences and skills and on the vital role of a supportive atmosphere, with unobtrusive tutor support. Tutors who respect and value the skills, knowledge and experience of other members of any learning group and who have the ability to harness these for the benefit of other learners, were referred to many times. Shining local examples of such tutors were named.

When asked what learning people actually need, the responses placed a considerable emphasis on basic or life skills, and learning aimed at improving knowledge of housing, finance, consumer and... a strong view of the role of learning for individuals and communities, and how it might be best delivered.

“You have to start where people are. Otherwise they won’t realise that they can leave behind their four walls and get involved. Once they come, they will know what to ask for.” (Respondent in Orford community group)

When asked about how we can find out about the learning opportunities people would like, and in particular how the Council can find out, most of the groups offered slightly different responses to the two questions. However, they generally felt that this was the same question repeated. The consensus was that what the Council needed to know was also what the community groups and others needed to know.

Everyone had a role in researching adult learning needs and sharing the information. There appeared to be a good level of understanding among respondents about the practicalities of local democracy and the role of local elected members. There were some strong views on the relatively new arrangements for a Council Executive group with a feeling that new arrangements had cut across direct representation and made some elected members more remote. There was some discussion about who represents the Council. Some respondents had not thought of Council officers working alongside them as being part of the Council, which may explain why they felt neglected by “The Council.”

“If the councillors came down here more often we could tell them what’s needed, but we can find ways to tell them anyway.” (Fairfield resident)
Respondents were able to articulate a range of ways to consult on adult learning. All groups expressed the view that talking to people through informal networks, door-to-door surveys, visiting groups or arranging public events is the most effective means of finding out about learning needs. Several other methods were suggested, including the potential role of community “champions” and ward councillors as advocates of ACL.

There was some feeling that technology could make information on learning opportunities more accessible. The groups generally felt that the use of the internet to access learning or information is helpful, though the importance of teacher guidance and support was also mentioned. Those groups who had access to community drop-in ICT provision were the most enthusiastic about the role of technology.

One person had found out about local learning opportunities by contacting the national Learndirect line, as advertised on television. He described his route, from initial enquiry, which he felt was dealt with sympathetically and appropriately, through a telephone call to the right person at the local college, and then a call from a local community volunteer inviting him to visit his local centre, have a chat and observe a class. This response came as a surprise to the researcher who had always assumed that, while TV advertising might raise awareness, it was unlikely that potential learners would use it as an access route.

There was general agreement that people would have benefited from accessing adult learning opportunities earlier. However, time, cost, lack of awareness and feelings of embarrassment in returning to learn were seen as obstacles. A few people observed that there is no point in learning until you are ready anyway, but felt that the barriers should be reduced so that everyone knew the opportunities would be there, when they felt ready. A few also observed that they needed to make space in their life to learn so that, for example, retirement, and other key life points, afforded new opportunities, suggesting that targeting learning can be effective in increasing participation. One woman said that she had always known about adult learning but did not feel she could cope with it for many years,

“I went to the women’s support group first and, when I got more confident, NAME came with me to see about the craft classes at the community centre. I wouldn’t have dared come on my own, everyone else seemed so clever.”

This learner now felt confident enough to attend the Council’s annual adult learning stakeholder conference and play a full part in the proceedings. Others reported walking past a local centre many times before plucking up the courage to go through the doors and make an enquiry.

Several information sources were cited when groups were asked how they found out about learning, indicating the value of using a variety of advertising and feedback methods. Word of mouth from a friend, neighbour, relative or community worker featured strongly. The consensus was that it was a rare individual who responded to advertising, either locally or nationally, or who had the courage to call in at a centre to find out what was going on. Other ways to engage or to be alongside individuals were considered vital.

A discussion about the barriers to participating in learning focused on concerns about cost, access and low self esteem, together with the need for a welcoming environment and a supportive teacher. When asked if groups could develop and sustain learning without a tutor most groups felt that a group leader with particular skills was important. There was disagreement about whether such a person needed to be a qualified tutor or a trained community worker, or whether a local person with the right attitude could support learning. One man had felt so strongly about the role of trained tutors in his own learning journey, through mental health problems to membership of several groups and classes, that he had written to the principal of the local college about proposed class cuts,

“Everybody told me that I was wasting my time and I wouldn’t get a reply, but he did write back and he said he was interested to know how changes in college funding were affecting people in the community. I know we lost some classes but I was glad I had the courage and skills to be able to tell him.”

Conclusions

Our research suggests that leadership in ACL needs to involve learners and communities as well as staff and colleagues and requires leaders who can actively engage a wide range of people and interests. Leaders in adult education tend to articulate a desire to involve learners in every part of the cycle of planning, delivering and evaluating adult learning. However, David Sherlock, until recently the Chief Inspector at ALI, highlighted in his final annual report (2005/06) a disconnect between strategic intentions and operation management. This supports the view that managers and tutors in direct contact with learners involve them whenever possible, but that strategic planning and leadership does not always establish all the mechanisms for genuine feedback, consultation and involvement.

ACL leaders therefore need new skills and greater understanding to cope with these challenges. While FE colleges have changed considerably over the last fourteen years and have built a culture of leadership teams and professional development, ACL providers are relatively small with few full time posts, let alone trained managers. This ensures that ACL leaders are close to their learners and have a background that is learner-centred and can embrace democratic approaches to provision. These attributes are highly valued in the field, but need to be developed to ensure proactive leadership during this period of great change.

Watters, Armstrong and Merton (2004) identified the main challenges for leaders in adult education as being to: identify clearly the links between policy and service delivery; lead complex partnerships; handle ambiguity in employee relationships, and manage stakeholder groups effectively. They assert that ACL leaders need to demonstrate that they themselves value learning and are able to hear a wide range of voices, so that all stakeholders are actively drawn into an ongoing debate that feeds change, quality improvement and active learning at all levels.
This suggests a complex environment for ACL leaders, which continues to be in a state of change, and of declining public funding. The Chief Inspector has suggested that those ACL organisations that find effective ways to manage partnerships and engage learners and communities in shaping provision, are those that do best in inspection, as they can demonstrate real quality improvement and responsiveness, chipping with local and national agendas for increased social cohesion and prosperity.

The findings of this research, after consultation with only a few community groups, mined such a rich seam of community views and aspirations that the ACL team intend to maintain this form of dialogue and extend it to inform the wider planning, delivery and evaluation of provision. The research can therefore contribute to the wider local government debate on community involvement. This may help to forge stronger strategic links across the Council. It can also contribute to the ongoing national debate, in both ACL and in local government, about community engagement, which has been re-energized by the Lyons Report and the local Government White Paper.

Further research is needed to investigate the role and development of community leaders, especially if they are to become learning specialists or expert learners. There is still much to be done in exploring the needs of particular groups in our communities, for example, groups for the disabled, the chronically ill, or for black and minority ethnic groups. This points to the need for research with those not engaged in active learning, the majority of adult individuals in any town. Current practice, and this research, only really benefits from the views of those already engaged in learning, or the views of community groups who are accustomed to some degree of dialogue with the Council’s members and officers. However, the focus and nature of the limited research work we have conducted suggests that we may have a model for approaches to other community groups and individuals which sits well alongside the values and principles of ACL.

Recommendations
1. That councils consider using established community groups as an important resource in community consultation.
2. That councils consider the resourcing of a range of community groups to conduct community consultation and feedback on behalf of the Council.
3. That the Council Lifelong Learning team and WLP find ways to include community groups as a regular part of their consultation feedback strategy, whether or not the Council take up this recommendation at corporate level.
4. That the Lifelong Learning team deploys the budget for adult learning in line with Council and LSC priorities, but also in response to feedback and demand from local communities. And that the annual plan and decisions be shared and reported on at local levels as well as at democratic and stakeholder levels in the Council. The first step to this should be the development of a Learner Involvement Strategy which is then kept under constant review.
5. That the Council consider how to integrate ACL managers and leaders more fully into its structures and consider sourcing appropriate leadership training.

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The Learner Voice and Diversity

Listening to the Learner Voice: a “Bottom-up” Approach to Equality and Diversity

Rachel Drennan, Stoke-on-Trent College

Executive Summary

This project highlights the value of listening to the “Learner Voice” as a way of improving Equality and Diversity in an FE college. The project used a semi-structured questionnaire to explore the perceptions, views and voices of students, particularly in relation to race and disability. It considers how learners see Equality and Diversity, and whether they feel their views are listened to and acted upon. Whilst learners’ perceptions were consistent on many issues, the perceived importance of these issues also varied considerably from group to group. The research findings reveal that many students valued the college and were positive about Equality and Diversity practices. However, the research also highlighted issues requiring further work, especially regarding the segregation of different cultural groups, disabilities and gender. In particular, learners pointed to several important areas where support for students with disabilities could be improved. Based on this research on learner voice, the report concludes by making various recommendations regarding improvements to Equality and Diversity within the College.

Introduction

This research project reviews the Equality and Diversity (E&D) practices in place within the College through a “bottom up” approach for mainly 16–18 year old students. In particular, the project focuses on students’ views on race and disability. The research explores the relationship between students, their peers, and staff within the college. It considers how learners see E&D, and whether they feel their views are listened to and acted upon. The research results will be communicated back to senior management, along with recommendations for the future. This will enable them to consider what practices could be improved upon, based on evidence straight from those that matter the most – the students.

The mission of the college is “Excellence in education and skills for work and life.” Underpinning this mission, the college has established values and strategic objectives, each of which has targets and measures, allowing the college to monitor effectively its progress. This research therefore contributes to continued improvement. E&D plays an extremely important part in our everyday lives and should be part of everything we do. As a college that is situated within a deprived area, it faces many issues related to E&D, and therefore makes this among some of its highest priorities for undertaking improvements and good working practices.
Within this study, the following primary research questions were explored:

1. What mechanisms exist for the views of the learner (with regard to E&D) to be communicated to senior management?
2. Do learners feel their views are listened to by senior management?
3. Are learners aware of the structure of the organisation?
4. What are learners’ perceptions of E&D?
5. Is E&D a whole college approach?

The aim of the project is to answer these questions by exploring students’ views on these themes. The overall research from the project will provide the college with useful recommendations for the future. Student feedback can contribute to the college’s further success through disseminating results to the leaders of the college to take forward and implement. The learner voice is key to the success of a large FE college such as this.

Research Framework

The field of the learner voice is a growing area that is taken increasingly seriously within FE Colleges. Learner voice can be defined as, “The views of learners on what, when and how they learn” (Faux 2006). The LSC has developed a Learner Involvement Strategy which includes the learner voice. This states that any student representation group must be diverse in order to give everyone a chance and to facilitate honest feedback. Learners must feel that their views are valued, and most importantly, communicated back to senior management. The final and possibly the most important aspect is for learners to feel satisfied with their involvement. With the opportunity to voice their own opinions, learners will feel empowered and enriched by the whole experience. It is also likely that facilitating the learner voice will, combat other pressures and enrich other skills (e.g. confidence); build relations with other students from a diverse range of backgrounds; and hopefully encourage others to get involved. Finally, it will enhance student/tutor/senior management relationships.

The assumptions underpinning E&D are that, “Every person has an equal chance, especially in areas such as education, employment and political participation. Recognising that everyone is different, respecting and encouraging these differences and valuing the benefits diversity brings” (Benhabib, 2002). It is therefore important for educational establishments to understand the urgency of tackling issues around racism, discrimination and understanding difference. The Foster Report states that to promote E&D, services should be improved for those with learning difficulties in FE Colleges. Colleges should also recruit more black and minority ethnic staff to support diversity awareness training, which can then be disseminated to core staff and fed into student activities/lessons.

The research questionnaire was designed to explore issues around race and disability. The College has a large percentage of BME learners (12%), and discovering if there are any issues between students and staff would start the process of change through implemented strategies for the future. Ellis (1989) believes that racism remains a key factor in explaining why Black and Asian people continue to sit on the disadvantaged side of Britain’s ethnic divide. Disability is the other area that is of particular interest for this research project. Do students with disabilities feel the College is meeting their individual needs? Some of the questions within the questionnaire are targeted only at students with disabilities to try and determine if they feel under represented in terms of the learner voice and by basic support needs that should be compulsory in modern day educational establishments. The Disability Rights Commission Act 1999 is working towards the elimination of discrimination towards disabled people; promoting equalisation of opportunities for disabled people; and encouraging good practice in the treatment of disabled people (Backing & Curfs, 2000). The LSC’s (2007) Disability Equality Scheme believes that people with disabilities remain under represented in the FE system and “what is offered has not kept pace with their needs.”

Research Methods

The research project focused on interacting directly with the learner to enable the student voice to be heard as fully as possible. The study was undertaken by one primary researcher, with whom all sensitive data were stored. The project uses prepared questions (between 40 and 50 depending on different groups) to ask key learner groups within the college about their opinions and perceptions regarding E&D. The following groups formed the basis of the research: Students with Disabilities Group (SWD); B.A. Voice (Black & Asian); Student Executive and Student Council; Challenge South Africa Group; Caring & Services Faculty; Business, Science & Culture Faculty; and Construction & Engineering Faculty.

The questions were semi-structured to enable further information to be sought if necessary during interviews. All research material was treated as confidential. The survey addressed what mechanisms and practices are in place, by listening to the learner voice in relation to E&D. This was conducted across the College’s two main campuses (Campus A and Campus B) and included course groups and established student groups. Of the 109 students who participated in the project, 74% were white, 69% were in the 16–18 age range, and 59% were female. This is similar to the overall figures of monitoring data held within the College.

The interviews concentrated on exploring E&D issues. Of the 109 students, 16 were one to one interviews lasting approximately thirty minutes. Another 11 were in small groups of no more than three at a time, again lasting for around thirty minutes. The rest were in focus groups ranging from 6 up to 12 per group, and lasting for approximately one hour. Some one to one interviews were arranged; but unfortunately a number of students forgot or did not turn up, despite incentives to take part, reminders and phone calls.
Questions were designed for different groups to try and gather extra information that may be useful. Therefore, questions were designed for B.A. Voice (Black and Asian), and Students with Disabilities (SWD), as well as interviews and other focus groups.

Groups were set up with three designated faculties within the college. Two groups were chosen from each faculty. Groups were from different course levels to make answers more diverse.

Interviews were organised with learners by going along to meetings e.g. Student with Disabilities group meeting or Student Council meetings.

Consent forms were used to reassure students that there was total anonymity.

Results were recorded in a number of ways. Originally interviews were to be recorded on a Dictaphone and then transcribed. This was tried with 5 people in the small focus groups at B.A Voice and proved difficult to facilitate. From then on, the researcher transcribed as the learners were talking. In focus groups, the researcher either transcribed, whilst the group was answering the questions, or to make it more interactive, the researcher asked for a few volunteers from each group to take down the results on a flip chart, which proved to be successful, keeping some of the challenging groups more focused.

Research Findings

The learners’ responses varied greatly throughout both the interviews and the focus groups, however there was some consistency on certain issues. The main findings from this research are now presented under the following five main headings: Existing Mechanisms for Learner Views; Management and Listening to the Views of the Learner, Learner Understanding of the Organisational Structure; Learner Perceptions of E&D, and E&D as a Whole College Approach.

1. Existing Mechanisms for Learner Views

Specific questions were asked about current mechanisms for communicating the views of the learner (with regards specifically to E&D) to senior management. The following questions related back to this issue:

Question 2: Have you seen any of the posters around the College about E&D?

Of the 8 focus groups, members of 6 had noticed the E&D posters around the College. One group stood out, because all its members had not seen the posters (situated at Campus B). In the case of another group also based at the same Campus, 62% stated that they had never seen the posters. This is interesting as, out of the 8 groups interviewed, three are based at Campus B. Of those three interviewed at Campus B, two of them have either not seen the posters at all, or the majority have not seen the posters.

Question 8: When you started at the College, was E&D included as part of your induction?

More than half of courses in both focus groups and interviewees believe that E&D was not mentioned in their induction. Some students could not remember. Interestingly, a few were on holiday but did not receive a “standard” induction (if at all) when they eventually started the College. Student comments included:

“Equal opps was mentioned.”

“No mention of disabilities – you had to organise everything yourself”

“It was based around the course and health and safety, but nothing else.”

Question 9: At your induction, were you made aware of specific people to approach if you have any problems?

Over three quarters of those interviewed confirmed that they were told in their induction who they could go to if they had problems. Of those interviewed at Campus B, two of them have either not seen the posters at all, or the majority have not seen the posters.

Consent forms were used to reassure students that there was total anonymity.

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“Connexions, Mentors or tutors.”

“Job bank, careers, counselling.”

Question 16: Have you completed a Learner Feedback Questionnaire?

Nearly half of those that took part in the focus groups said they had never completed a learner feedback questionnaire. Reasons for this included that they could not remember or had not been at the College long enough to have completed one (the questionnaires are yearly). Of those interviewed, three quarters stated they had completed a questionnaire. A possible reason for the inconsistency could be that they had been at the College longer.

“Yes, but some questions were not relevant.”

“No, I did not get a questionnaire” (deaf student)

Question 24: If you were bullied or harassed, do you know who you can get help from within the College?

Of the interviewed students, 32% said they did not know who they could go to if they were being bullied or harassed. Of the focus groups, only 14% of one group said they did not know who to go to. All the other groups knew at least one member of staff that they could or would confide in, suggesting that they felt they could approach someone they trust if they needed that support.

“No, not really – maybe my personal tutor?”

“Personal tutor, Student Entitlement – I’m not sure of their name.”
Question 19: Have you ever been asked your opinion on your course or College? & Question 20: Have any recommendations you have made had any impact?

One third of focus groups have never been asked their opinion, and nearly one third have only been asked their opinion about the course they are on and not the College as a whole. 81% of interviewees have been asked their opinion, but the majority of them are on the Student Council or the Student Executive. Only 25% however have said that it has made any impact, despite a high number being asked their opinion in the first place.

“My tutor has asked for my opinion, but it hasn’t made any difference.”

Question 21: Did anyone get back to you about your comments?

Just under half of the interviewees had received feedback on their comments, and half of the focus groups also. A large number had never received any feedback.

“My tutor has asked for my opinion, but it hasn’t made any difference.”

Question 27: Do you think staff notice or are aware if there is an issue e.g. bullying, harassment etc?

A third from both areas do not believe that staff notice if incidents like bullying are happening within the College. A small number from the focus groups believe that some staff ignore issues that may be going on.

“Not sure. The students are over 16 so it is their responsibility.”

Question 28: If staff do notice or are aware of an E&D issue, is it dealt with?

More than two thirds believe that staff would deal with an Equality and Diversity issue if they noticed it. However, around 10% of focus group participants believe that some staff would ignore issues.

“Yes, because I told my personal tutor about it and they dealt with it straight away.”

2. Management and Listening to the Views of the Learner

The following questions related back to this issue:

Question 17: Have you ever made a suggestion on how to improve things on your course or in the College & Question 18: Would it be acknowledged?

Nearly half of those in focus groups have made a suggestion before. Of the interviewees, 94% have made suggestions. Many of these respondents are on the Student Council or are on the Student Executive so make suggestions regularly there. 50% of the students with disabilities in the focus group had only ever made a suggestion in the group. 20% said they were too scared to suggest anything.

“Through questionnaires and tutorials mainly”

“We have meetings every Friday on our course to see how things are going, but I don’t think they are acknowledged a lot of the time.”

Question 19: Have you ever been asked your opinion on your course or College? & Question 20: Have any recommendations you have made had any impact?

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Just under half of the interviewees had received feedback on their comments, and half of the focus groups also. A large number had never received any feedback.

“The Student Union got back to me which made me feel valued.”

Question 27: Do you think staff notice or are aware if there is an issue e.g. bullying, harassment etc?

A third from both areas do not believe that staff notice if incidents like bullying are happening within the College. A small number from the focus groups believe that some staff ignore issues that may be going on.

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“Yes, because I told my personal tutor about it and they dealt with it straight away.”

3. Learner Understanding of the Organisational Structure

The following questions related back to this issue:

Question 10: Do you know who your Programme Manager is?

Nearly half from focus groups knew who their Programme Manager was, but only a third of interviewees knew this.

“I don’t know their name but I know who it is.”
Question 11: Do you know who is Head of your Faculty?
Only 13% of interviewees knew who the Head of their Faculty was, compared with over a third that knew it within the focus groups. This could be because they were not asked individually and some people would shout out the answer and potentially others may have agreed despite not knowing.

Question 12: Do you know who the Principal of the College is?
Two thirds of all participants did not know who the Principal of the College was. A few commented that they knew who he was or had met him but did not know his name. A few participants did not know the College had a Principal.

Question 30: Do you know what support services are available within the College?
All students were able to name at least one support service. Mentoring and Student Support were some of the most frequently mentioned by the focus groups. Careers/Job bank was the most mentioned by interviewees.

“Learning Support, Student Welfare and Financial Support are helpful.”

4. Learner Perceptions of E&D
The following questions related back to this issue:

Question 1: What do you understand by ‘Equality and Diversity’?
In the focus groups, just under a quarter of respondents were unsure and were unable to give their definition. The researcher mentioned equal opportunities and then the majority commented that they understood. Around a quarter of responses said E&D was “treating everybody the same, regardless of disability, race, religion etc.” One third of the one to one interviewees thought that E&D is “Being treated equally.”

Question 7: Do you know of anyone (potential staff or student) who has been put off from coming to the College due to E&D issues?
The majority of the focus groups did not know of anyone who had been put off from coming to the College but a significant amount (around one eighth) knew people who had been put off because there were “lots of Asians.”

Question 13: Do you think students get adequate training/information on E&D?
Over 50% of the focus groups felt they received a good amount of E&D training. 69% of the interviewees stated that they did not get enough lessons or training in E&D. This could be due to the mix of courses, as some courses e.g. Health and Social Care include E&D as part of the course.

“It is automatically built into my course because of what the course is about.”

“Not really, there needs to be more for people to understand one another.”

Question 14: Do you think teaching staff take care not to use discriminatory terms?
Nearly three quarters of all participants said that staff were careful not to say anything discriminatory towards a student. A few focus group members commented that some staff sometimes “joke around”, although this can be seen as unprofessional.

Question 22: Have you ever read the Equality and Diversity Policy?
Both groups of students answered very similarly, with only 10–15% of students having read the E&D Policy.

Question 23: Have you ever read the Bullying and Harassment Policy?
More than two thirds from both groups have not read the policy but many have seen or heard of this, and many more have read it.

Question 25: Have you ever been bullied?
Around 15% of those in focus groups have been bullied whilst at the College. In comparison, 25% of those interviewed have been bullied within the College. This statistic may be more prominent as interviewees felt more comfortable telling the researcher in a confidential way. Many students may have felt embarrassed to disclose such a private and traumatic experience in front of a whole group of students. On the other hand, those that were interviewed were mainly Asian or black and/or had a disability.

“No, but have been treated differently because of disability.”

“There were a few issues at the beginning, but I’m not sure if they were racially motivated or not.”

Question 26: Have you ever seen bullying happen to someone because they are different? (different race, dress, hair etc)
Only one third of both groups had not seen any bullying happen within the College because the person/people were different i.e. learning disability, physical disability, race etc.

“Yes, teasing because people have certain disabilities.”

Question 38: Do you feel the College has a diverse population?
Of the focus groups, 100% said they thought the College had a diverse population. Of the interviewees, 13% did not think the College has a diverse population.

5. E&D as a Whole College Approach.

The following questions related back to this issue:

Question 3: What were your first impressions of the College in terms of E&D?

Half of the focus groups and the interviewees felt their first impressions of the College were welcoming and friendly. Some students did however feel there was not enough awareness of disabilities at the College.

"Some students think all students can hear."

"Some of the Asian lads don’t treat girls in particular with respect."

Question 15: Do staff adapt the way they teach if students have impairments or learning difficulties?

Nearly two thirds of interviewees stated that staff do adapt the way they teach. There were not many ‘no’ answers but... that 60% of the Students with Disabilities group thought that teaching staff did not do anything different in class.

"No, got no help at all, even though I’m dyslexic."

Question 32: Do you feel comfortable asking for special arrangements e.g. communicator, key for the lift etc? (Students with Disabilities only)

80% of students with disabilities felt comfortable asking for special arrangements.

Question 33: Are special arrangements easily accessed?

Three quarters of students said that they were not easy to access.

"If there were lots of students with disabilities there would be too few communicators."

Question 36: Are there any facilities within the College that you feel could be better for students with disabilities? (SWD’s only)

30% felt the toilets could be a lot better within the College. Other areas were chairs in the canteen, doors, lifts, and wheelchair access in all rooms.

Question 39: Do you think the College is a good place for disabled people?

50% of students with disabilities thought the College was not a good place for them. Only 30% thought it was a good place for them.

"No, not great for access and students are put anywhere in the building rather than on the ground floor which would make more sense."

"For learning – yes, but for access, the college needs to adapt."

Question 39: Do you think the College represents you (minority)?

Only 6% of both groups felt that the College did not represent them as a minority group.

"No … it needs to improve. I’m deaf, so why is it I can only talk to learning support?"

Question 41: Do you think the College is a place where people can express themselves freely?

Nearly a quarter of the focus group felt that they could not express themselves freely, compared with 6% of interviewees. However, 50% of one group said they would prefer "stay quiet and not get involved."

Question 48: Are there any E&D issues that you feel are invisible to the College?

Nearly 75% from both groups felt there were no issues the College did not know about. However, around 10% of focus group answers were related to racism and bullying that the College may not know about. Another comment that is quite significant is about the Students’ Union. Students feel it should be relocated to Campus A as this will not only tackle other issues e.g. lack of space, but also encourage greater mixing of student groups and encourage diversity.

Question 51: Are there any groups of students you feel get more help/attention from staff than others?

Over 80% of students felt that everyone was treated the same regardless of disabilities or ethnic origin.

Question 52: Do you feel you are fairly treated?

A similar proportion of students from both the focus groups and the interviewees (12%) commented that they felt they were not fairly treated by the College. The students that commented about this were from the Students with Disabilities group and the Asian and Black group, as well as a faculty group.

"I have always been treated fairly throughout my time at the College."

"No, people don’t listen or believe students over lecturers."

"Some students think all students can hear."

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Question 47: Do you think the College is a place where people can express themselves freely?

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Question 51: Are there any groups of students you feel get more help/attention from staff than others?

Over 80% of students felt that everyone was treated the same regardless of disabilities or ethnic origin.

Question 52: Do you feel you are fairly treated?

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Question 63: Are there any groups of students you feel get more help/attention from staff than others?

Over 80% of students felt that everyone was treated the same regardless of disabilities or ethnic origin.

Question 64: Do you feel you are fairly treated?

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"I have always been treated fairly throughout my time at the College."

"No, people don’t listen or believe students over lecturers."
introduced earlier on to the students and explained in greater detail. Finally, the Student Union does not attract as many students as it should.

2. Management and Listening to the Views of the Learner
Many students confirmed that they are encouraged to have their say on their courses which can lead to a better understanding between students and staff. Many of the participants were course representatives, on the Student Council, in the Student Executive Committee or belonged to one of the established groups. This meant they were accustomed to hearing people voice their opinions or actually doing so themselves.

Students also feel that some staff would not notice if bullying for example, was happening within the College. Some students feel that staff ignore bullying. There maybe a number of reasons why students would think this, and perhaps more research needs to be done in this area. This could be crucial for the College in terms of anti-bullying strategies.

3. Learner Understanding of the Organisational Structure
Many students did not know who their Programme Manager was, but even more did not know who the Head of their Faculty was. The highest proportion of students did not know who the Principal was or even who the College was. It seems that the further up the senior management scale, the less likely the students know or recognise staff.

4. What are Learners’ Perceptions of E&D?
The research found that many students misunderstand or do not know what E&D means. Many feel it is about everyone being treated the same. Others thought it is about something totally unrelated. Students commented that they did not know they had an E&D policy, or the Bullying and Harassment Policy.

5. E&D as a Whole College Approach
Students who did not have disabilities considered the College support to be of a good standard. The students that were not so happy were those that had learning disabilities such as dyslexia, as not many of them received help or were not offered help in the first instance. Many of the students with disabilities were dissatisfied about the lack of help that they have in the classroom, as well as facilities such as toilets and ramps being substandard for people in wheelchairs, for example. Access was also an issue for many.

Question 40: Does the College meet the needs of students with disabilities?
40% of students with disabilities thought the College only caters for some but not all students that have some kind of disability. The other 60% that felt the college does meet their individual needs:

“Yes, but is too slow dealing with things that are important.”

“I have always had a communicator since the start which has made life so much easier.”

Question 42: Do you feel more should be done to help people to feel more comfortable at the College?
Over 80% of students felt more could be done to help people feel more comfortable at the College.

“Eliminate bullying.”

“Eliminate racism.”

“Training for students at induction on disabilities.”

Question 53: Is the building accessible for you? (SWD)
Only 50% of students with disabilities felt the building is accessible for them. 30% stated that it is not good for wheel chair users:

“No, getting around is a nightmare. We need to know what facilities are available rather than finding out one by one.”

Conclusions
It is clear from these research findings that students were generally very positive about having the chance to have their say. The majority were happy within the College and thought that support and teaching staff were very friendly. However, this research on “listening to the learner voice” also raises a number of E&D issues that need more work from the College.

1. Existing Mechanisms for Learner Views
There are some mechanisms in place that are working, e.g. the E&D posters (although it seems Campus B may not have been targeted quite so much). Students generally articulated a sound understanding of the support that is available within the College. This shows that staff are introducing themselves and making other students aware from the start. Students knew who to go to if an incident occurs. Generally, students feel their views will make a difference to how the College is run.

The College induction does not have nearly enough E&D information. This could be because inductions are short and concentrate primarily on the course itself. Also, the Learner Feedback Questionnaire was not well known amongst the students as many of them had not yet had the opportunity of taking part in the annual survey. Many have never heard of it and do not recall ever completing one. This therefore needs to be
Recommendations

In light of these conclusions, the following recommendations can be made:

1. Ensure that policies on E&D and Bullying and Harassment are incorporated into every student induction.

2. Ensure that students are informed of specific staff that they can go to for information, advice and guidance in the first instance.

3. Promote Student Support Services so that learners know where to go for advice regarding any issues they may have. This includes financial support, counselling and health services within the College.

4. Embed E&D into all courses, with particular focus on courses like Engineering and Construction that currently have limited information fed through to students. Disability and Race to be included.

5. Ensure E&D is included in regular tutorials and/or enrichment activities.

6. Recognise that staff and students should work in partnership to target bullying within the College. Staff to be aware of procedures for bullying and harassment. Students to be aware of members of staff they can approach if being bullied or witnessing. For everyone to be generally more confident to tackle the issue – further training for staff and embedded into each course.

7. Consider moving the Student Union (Campus A) to an improved location within the College. The Student Union is currently located in an isolated position which limits student involvement. It is also cold, aesthetically displeasing and too small for the amount of students present within this college. Moving the Student Union would not only increase usage but mean that some students (particularly female) would not feel intimidated to use it.

8. Ensure greater student integration within the Student Union. The Student Union currently attracts a high proportion of BME students in relation to other students to Campus A. It also attracts more males than females, and predominantly younger students to the Student Union. It is recommended that policies need to encourage greater integration of cultural mixes, along with ensuring a diverse range of activities to attract both male and female students of all ages. This requires ongoing monitoring.

9. Encourage continuation of student representation at formal meetings e.g. E&D Committee, to hear the learner voice.

10. Develop important Student Groups e.g. B.A. Voice and Students with Disabilities.

11. Encourage the set up of new student groups within the college to include E&D issues e.g. recycling, anti-bullying.

12. Ensure Learner Feedback meetings include E&D as a permanent agenda item in all Faculty Feedback Meetings. All staff are to report on E&D issues from Feedback sessions with students. This should be raised with each student and go on to be raised at every meeting.

13. Enhance the induction process by integrating E&D issues and policies more fully. During induction also inform students about the SMT and the governance structure of the College.

14. Ensure further research is carried out to investigate the issues raised in this research project to improve best practice in the College.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to all the learners that took part in the research. Thank you also to all the managers and staff who helped accommodate the research within their timetable. A special thanks goes to Lynn Tinkale, Emma Moseley, Iqlaq Ahmed and Zoe Simpson for their individual help, support, hard work and patience throughout.

References


Investigating the Under-Performance of Ethnic Groups by Listening to the Voice of Staff and Students

Darrell Bate and Steven Sutton, Waltham Forest College

Executive Summary

This report outlines an action research project drawing on staff and student voice to develop a toolkit designed to address the problems of underachievement amongst certain groups. The research found that at WFC Black Caribbean and Mixed Heritage students at both 16-19 and 19+ are underachieving in certain subject areas. Catering and Hospitality, Hairdressing, Health and Social Care and Electrical Installations. After presenting this quantitative information to a sample of students and curriculum managers alike, and recording their responses, we endeavoured to establish a set of proposals, to which the College can respond in ways that demonstrate a commitment to tackling educational underachievement and a continued commitment to its Learner Involvement Strategy. Our research findings suggest that linking ethnicity and educational attainment can be problematic and that the solutions for tackling underachievement may apply to any group deemed to be underachieving, not just Black Caribbean and Mixed Heritage groups. The report concludes with a set of recommendations that arose out of the Student Discussion Group. We believe that collectively, both staff and students at Waltham Forest College (WFC), College of North East London (CoNEL) and similar-sized institutions can explore underachievement together and apply a range of solutions to common problems.

Introduction

This research seeks to identify critical success factors for student achievement from published research and tests these theories with the views of practitioners and students. Research questions to be addressed by this project are:

1. What are the critical success factors for under/over achievement rates amongst ethnic groups?
2. What differences can be identified between high and low performing courses that include these groups?
3. What College Management measures/staff development should be implemented to improve success rates of these groups?

The College of North East London was chosen to work in partnership on this project because of its similarity in socio economic profile and high proportion of the target groups covered in this study. The overall outcome has been to produce a toolkit for the College’s SMT to respond to the factors that contribute to learner achievement, enabling them to make effective change to drive up success rates (see appendix 1).
Daniels (2004), a Jamaican academic, attributes Jamaican Youth culture to underachievement of Black boys in British schools. He argues that “the world is full of minorities against whom there is some prejudice and yet who are notably successful in commerce to the arts and sciences.” Daniels also highlights two specific points about Black male underachievement, “a marked lack of stability in Jamaican households and a culture of perpetual spontaneity and immediate gratification.” Furthermore, he criticises a recent report that disregards cultural characteristics as a possible explanation of failure. This report asserts that Black boy underachievement is a consequence of racism of many teachers and a low number of Black teachers, which, according to Daniels, implies that “The fault is not with them, their tastes and the way they conduct themselves, but with society as a whole.”

The types of explanation suggested for underperformance by some ethnic minorities have certainly changed. Early studies focused largely on psychological, cultural and material factors relating to ethnic groups and that when assimilation to life in Britain began, their results would improve. For example, Gillborn (1990) accepted that poverty and other “home” factors had some influence, but was more interested in school factors, particularly teachers’ attitudes and aspects of the curriculum. Coard (1971) observed the absence of Black literature, history and music in the British curriculum, and of positive images of Black people in school books. But in 2007, the situation is quite different, an ethnographic curriculum exists; the ethnic profile of teaching staff has increased, there are a number of positive Black role models in a variety of fields and a transparent complaints system exists in virtually all educational institutions that enables students to report racism by teachers wherever it occurs. Thus the importance of purely “school factors” may not hold the same significance.

Mac an Ghaill, an Irish sociologist, described in “Beyond the White Norm” his own early research into education and ethnicity as being too much from a White standpoint: “When I began to examine the schooling of Black young people, I did not initially report their view of things” (1989: 175–189). He criticised other researchers for their “culturalist perspective” and adopting the “White norm” of viewing the Black community as a “problem.” He ... through discussion forum and one to one interview, thereby allowing participants to express their views and experiences.

Research Methods

The methodology for this project followed a standard literature review, analysis of statistical data and collection of data using questionnaire, interview and discussion groups. The statistical data analysis required us to collect the College’s success rates for all learners and specifically, success rates by age and ethnicity and compare these with similar data from the partner College, CoNEL. We found that two minority groups had success rates below the College rate of 76% and this was peculiar to both the 16-18 and 19+ age group; a third category “Unknown” was found to be underperforming across both age ranges at WFC. At CoNEL, 5 groups were found to be underperforming at both 16-18 and 19+.
In relation to the two underperforming groups (Black Caribbean and Mixed at WFC), we then identified the curriculum areas where these groups were shown to be underperforming against overall College success rates for the respective age groups. Further analysis showed where underperformance applied to both age groups. For example, it was found that the two identified ethnic groups were specifically underperforming in Catering and Hospitality at both 16-18 and 19+. Following the data analysis, the project focused on the two identified groups (Black Caribbean and Mixed Heritage) in order to address the key research questions. We wanted to give authenticity to the findings by involving the subjects of this research. Listening to the learner voice was a key objective of our research project.

Firstly, a questionnaire ranking exercise and explanatory handout was devised that set out a range of statements as possible causes for underachievement. Respondents were asked to rank the top three in order of merit. Personal tutors from the identified vocational areas where students were underachieving were asked to manage the process with students and help them to complete the ranking exercise. Some students objected to the task and did not want to participate, whilst others felt the questionnaire should extend to students of all ethnicities. As a result, it was decided to include all students, regardless of ethnicity and change the task slightly, discussing each point individually rather than ranking just three. While this made it more difficult to produce meaningful quantitative analysis by ethnicity, the exercise did generate full and frank discussion in some tutorial groups and this was a helpful precursor to establishing the focus group. All students who had initially completed the ranking exercise were invited to attend a follow up discussion group. The aim was to unpack each statement on the questionnaire and then suggest possible solutions for each of them to tackle underachievement.

It was felt to be important to seek the views of the curriculum managers of the subject areas identified as those where learners (related to this project) were underachieving. This enabled us, firstly, to establish their response to data evidence that showed certain ethnic groups were underachieving in their areas and, secondly, to identify aspects of their course profile or practice that may be contributing to this underachievement. Practitioners clearly are central to identifying effective ways of addressing these aspects of underachievement. By focusing on the curriculum managers, the intention was to produce a practical toolkit that incorporated teaching style, suitability of materials, assessment methods and feedback. The project aims were explained and each curriculum manager was interviewed separately using a semi-structured format based around the five questions.

Research Findings

Quantitative Analysis

The success data for ethnic minority groups (2005/06) at both WFC and CoNEL were as follows:

- 3 groups underperform at WFC compared with the College success rates at ages 16-18 and 19+. They are Black Caribbean, Mixed and “Unknown” groups; at CoNEL, 5 groups have been identified: Bangladeshi, Black African, Black Caribbean, Black Other and Mixed. At 60%, the Black Caribbean group at 16-18 had the lowest success rate at CoNEL and at 19+, with 67%, “Black Other” is 20% below the college success rate.

- 3 groups overperform at WFC compared with the College success rates at both 16-18 and 19+ age groups. They are Indian, Bangladeshi and White groups. At CoNEL, Chinese and “Unknown” are the overperforming groups.

- Significantly, at 16-18, the Chinese success rate is 94% at WFC (26% above the College success rate); at 19+, however, the success rate for this group is 70% (7% below the College rate). Despite similar numbers of Chinese enrolments at both colleges, CoNEL achieved high success rates for this group in 2005/06 (100% for 16-18 age group and 93% for 19+).

- The high attainment of the Indian and Bangladeshi groups at WFC suggests that, where English may be an additional language, this is not a barrier to achievement. In addition, these two groups demonstrate that ethnic heritage does not presuppose underachievement. At CoNEL, the Bangladeshi group underperforms at both 16-18 and 19+.

- Success data for 2005/06 show that despite Black Caribbeans attaining higher than average growth in success (+9% at 16-18 years and +15% at 19+), this group were still underperforming against overall College success rates; the Mixed group at 16-18 showed negative growth of -2% and a positive growth of 5% at 19+ but still underperforming as a group against overall rates.

Underachieving groups at 16-18 and 19+

The following two tables provide a detailed breakdown according to age, ethnic origin and course (numbers in brackets indicate the combined total of learners from both age groups who started that course). The first table shows relevant data for the Black Caribbean group at WFC.
This shows that 105 learners are underachieving in those subject areas whilst 98 are overachieving when compared with college success rates.

At CoNEL, Hairdressing NVQ2, Humanities, Numeracy and Maths have been identified as areas where mixed students at 16-18 and 19+ are significantly underperforming, with success rates ranging from 33% to 60%. Over-performing subject areas include Business and Access, Introductory Information Technology (On site), Arts, Media and ESOL Offsite, with success rates ranging from 88% to 100%.

**Overachieving groups at 16-18 and 19+**

This table shows relevant data for the Indian group at WFC.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>16-18 and 19+ under-performing subject areas</th>
<th>16-18 and 19+ over-performing subject areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AutoCad (22)</td>
<td>Art and Design (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty (9)</td>
<td>Fashion and Clothing (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICT Part time (12)</td>
<td>Science (4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table reveals that, even though the Indian group are overperforming overall, when compared with the College success rates, in AutoCad and Beauty areas, both age groups are underachieving (31 learners), whilst 21 learners are overachieving.

This table shows relevant data for the Bangladeshi group at WFC.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>16-18 and 19+ underperforming subject areas</th>
<th>16-18 and 19+ overperforming subject areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>ESOL other (3 starters)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Years (4 starters)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table reveals that, even though the Indian group are overperforming overall, when compared with the College success rates, in AutoCad and Beauty areas, both age groups are underachieving (31 learners), whilst 21 learners are overachieving.

This table shows relevant data for the Chinese group at WFC.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>16-18 and 19+ underperforming subject areas</th>
<th>16-18 and 19+ overperforming subject areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>ESOL other (3 starters)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Years (4 starters)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table shows that 7 learners are overachieving in the two subjects above. However, at CoNEL, Bangladeshis have been identified as underperforming in Introductory Information Technology (Franchise and Offsite) and Construction (Franchise).

Chinese learners at WFC aged 19+ are underachieving when compared with the College success rate. The largest concentration of Chinese learners is in part time Catering where 8 learners started and achieved 75% success rate (2% under the College rate); 10 other courses had enrolments of less than 5 learners and of these,
Institutional racism

One student said institutional racism is not as prevalent as ten years ago and that no college in London is institutionally racist. This area prompted little discussion and perhaps suggests that this is not considered a major cause of underachievement.

Ethnic profile of teaching staff

One student said she had experienced one Black teacher “pushing” Black students more because of their colour. Most felt ... more important than their ethnicity. There was a consensus that the ethnic diversity of the student body and staff is good.

Aspirations and values

Aspirations and values of the main culture, that is, expectation of White families that their child will go on to ... children to go to university at eighteen is an outdated stereotype and perhaps more related to a particular social class, “some may want a trade, not university.” Others felt that it was more important to “push yourself” and not adapt to cultural aspirations. Comments suggested that wanting a “nice life, home, family, etc were more important for some than a university education.”

Low expectations

Discussion centred around stereotypes that students had personally encountered. Two Black Caribbean students had been pushed towards music and sport courses rather than more academic-oriented subjects. The Personal tutor said she had seen examples in the College of teaching staff “pigeonholing” students and making assumptions about academic ability. This was not specific to any particular ethnic group.

Distinctive, Black male characteristics

Students felt that it was unacceptable for people to “hang around” on the campus and that security staff should play a bigger role in dispersing these people as it creates a bad impression for passers by ... the College unchallenged without ID, so security needs to be more pro-active. A lot of discussion focused on Black males “hanging around” on the College steps (and not all of them necessarily WFC students!) One student said a friend from another college had said to her that this College has a reputation for being a “Bad Man” college, which attracts “a certain kind of student.” Another student made the comment that students who have failed a course elsewhere and are retaking it here often get bored by the repetitious nature of the subject or the standard of the teaching and so prefer to “hang out” on the stairs; one student referred to this as “BMT” (Black Man Time). A female student said that girls have a different focus to boys which is why they often do better educationally (girls will worry about teenage pregnancy, boys about being shot). One

5 had 1 Chinese learner each who achieved no success. The high success rate of this ethnic group in the 16-18 age group (94%) should be considered in the context of low enrolments (9 enrolments, 8 successes). At CoNEL, success rates for the Chinese were both excellent (100% for 16-18 age group and 93% for 19+).

Qualitative Analysis

A Discussion Group was organised for students from 4 main tutorial groups to talk about issues of underachievement; specifically, the causes of underachievement contained in the ranking activity used in the tutorials. The following attended the meeting: Assistant Principal Curriculum Performance and Improvement, Curriculum and Quality Improvement Officers, Student Support Worker and Discussion Facilitator, Personal Tutor (Engineering), 8 students from Engineering and Hairdressing, and the Student Union President.

The Student Support Worker facilitated the meeting and the Assistant Principal was in attendance to represent Senior Management. The Curriculum and Quality Improvement Officer attended to provide a more detailed overview of the project and its aims and the Engineering Personal Tutor attended to help prompt discussion amongst the group of students, most of whom consisted of her engineering students. Permission was sought to record the meeting and no objections were made. The Student Support Worker gave a brief overview of the project and explained the task students would be asked to complete. The key themes raised by the students were as follows:

Low level of household income

Some students linked this with father absenteeism but said it is not necessarily specific to Black Caribbean or mixed groups but all ethnic groups (including White). Whilst low income was no barrier to university education a few years ago (as maintenance grants were readily available), today the situation is different (high tuition fees, huge student debt, etc). One student stated that money did not affect education as EMA is given and Fee Oyster is available. Another student emphasised that you can make £100 a day by working, and this kind of financial incentive can affect attendance and education, so the choices made ultimately affect education, not level of household income. Parents who have provided well for their children may still find that their children are disruptive and rebellious, so money and material possessions do not always have a positive impact on achievement.

One student said the “prestige of the street” can override the importance of education and be a distraction that contributes to underachievement. Another student felt there is very little the College can do. The Assistant Principal said that whilst the College is limited in what it can do about levels of household income, it can ensure that EMA is paid on time. It can also play a bigger role in emphasising that the College is an institution for second-chance learning which can increase earning power.

Institutional racism

One student said institutional racism is not as prevalent as ten years ago and that no college in London is institutionally racist. This area prompted little discussion and perhaps suggests that this is not considered a major cause of underachievement.

Ethnic profile of teaching staff

One student said she had experienced one Black teacher “pushing” Black students more because of their colour. Most felt that the respect shown to students by a teacher, as well as subject knowledge and the ability to speak clear English, are more important than their ethnicity. There was a consensus that the ethnic diversity of the student body and staff is good.

Aspirations and values

Aspirations and values of the main culture, that is, expectation of White families that their child will go on to university, aroused much discussion. One student commented that the expectation of white families expecting their children to go to university at eighteen is an outdated stereotype and perhaps more related to a particular social class, “some may want a trade, not university.” Others felt that it was more important to “push yourself” and not adapt to cultural aspirations. Comments suggested that wanting a “nice life, home, family, etc were more important for some than a university education.”

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student believed there was nothing specific the College could do about specific Black male characteristics, but most agreed that security must have a bigger role to play and should move people on who hang around on the steps.

Father absenteeism
Students felt that this was an issue that contributed to underachievement but was not specific to any particular ethnic group.

Black role models
Interestingly, all students felt that the ethnic profile of a teacher did not matter; “it is the ability and personality of that teacher that matters.” However, a later suggestion by one participant that the College should encourage more Black male tutors as role models would seem to contradict this view. This point concurred with the Catering and Hospitality Curriculum Manager’s view who suggested more Black chefs like Ainsley Harriot should be used as role models to recruit Black and Mixed Heritage students to this area.

Practical solutions
Students were asked to offer practical solutions the College could implement to help address issues of underachievement. The following recommendations were made:

a) The College needs to make it clear to students that it is unacceptable to hang around the College steps, hence the need to raise the profile of security staff. People can walk in unchallenged without ID, so security needs to be more proactive. Also, introduce scanners to wand people on entry to the College which will create a safer environment. More random police checks could also help improve security and safety. This recommendation is largely concerned with the importance of security rather than specific measures to combat underachievement; nonetheless, it is clearly an important issue as it evoked much discussion.

b) Highlight options other than university to students (engage them with benefits of vocational trades and wider opportunities).

c) Ensure that students receive more English language skills, literacy and numeracy and less music and sports, as one student stated, “More knowledge equals more power.”

d) The College should have more sustained, ongoing cultural events (not just Black History Month) so people have a much better understanding of a variety of cultures present at the College. There was considerable feeling that, if the College community had a better respect for the variety of cultures and individuals within it, this would raise self-esteem and a feeling of belonging in the College, as one respondent stated, “More prominence should be given to ongoing cultural events not just Black History Month but other cultures represented at the College.” This was a strong example of learner voice, which, if addressed, can bring effective change.

e) The College should encourage more Black male tutors as role models.

\[ \frac{}{\text{This discussion forum should consult a larger number of people and collect many more views on the causes of underachievement.}} \]

The research interviews with curriculum managers provided additional valuable insights into areas that present leadership challenges. One of the most striking observations was how well the Curriculum Managers knew their students. One talked about the tendency of black males to take on the role of a father/ guardian and look after a younger sibling, which can result in poor attendance. Another commented that black males tend to treat male teachers better and that there is sometimes a lack of respect towards female teachers.

To the question about specific teaching methods working better with some ethnic minority groups than others, three mentioned practical work and group and pair work as being particularly important in engaging these groups, although these are teaching methods that work best with all students, regardless of ethnicity.

Regarding assessment methods, one Curriculum Manager said that oral questioning worked well in fostering ease of communication especially in relation to those for whom written literacy is a problem, but again, this was not specific to any group. However, another observed that Bangladeshi in Health and Social Care liked discussion work in groups first and tended to “trial” what they wanted to say before addressing a larger group. In Hairdressing, “All students like the ‘hands on’ nature of the course and this is a compulsory part of the course for all.”

Regarding materials, all interviewees thought that their materials were sufficiently ethnocentric except within Electrical Installations where materials are produced externally so are not sufficiently diverse. In Hairdressing, the point was made that “the qualification is geared towards achieving and developing skills in European hair although there are components of the course where Afro hair features.” The notion that the ethnic profile of a teacher can affect the success of a student aroused some suspicion. It was generally felt that lecturers’ ethnicity ought not to affect success, though, for example, all White lecturers teaching Black Caribbean students Afro hairstyles could be problematic because definite skills are needed for Afro hair and not all White hairdressing staff necessarily have these skills. A more detailed account of these interview findings is included in the appendix to the final report submitted to CEL by the authors and available from them.\]
Conclusions and Recommendations

The research findings suggest that linking ethnicity and educational attainment can be problematic for the following reasons:

1. A multitude of home, school, cultural and social factors interact, so there is no simple explanation that links ethnicity and educational attainment.

2. Patterns of underachievement are misleading for groups who may return to education later in life to acquire qualifications.

3. The ethnicity and other characteristics of researchers and interested parties to this project may affect their conclusions (Hawthorne effect).

4. It can unnecessarily draw attention to a "non-issue", e.g. some groups who have success rates of just 1% or 2% below the College success rate might be deemed to have "underachieved."

5. The solutions for tackling underachievement may apply to any group who are deemed to be underachieving, not just Black Caribbean and Mixed Heritage groups.

The following recommendations arose out of the Student Discussion Group:


2. Highlight vocational and other opportunities other than university.

3. Ensure more English language, literacy and numeracy skills are delivered and less music and sport.

4. Host more sustained and diverse cultural events.

5. Have more Black male tutors as role models.

6. Consult a larger cohort of students and collect their views on underachievement.

The following leadership challenges to be addressed by the SMT include strategies to raise success rates of underachieving groups:

1. Draw on resources from the Teacher Training Agency who are devising strategies for teachers who work with Black pupils.

2. Create a support network for non-Black teachers to share experiences together of working with Black pupils through specific diversity training, e.g. working with black learners (cultural traits of these learners, common misconceptions about this group, cultural learning styles of BME groups etc.)

Acknowledgments

Our thanks and appreciation is given to a number of WFC staff and students for their help and contributions whilst undertaking this project. For organising the tutorials and facilitating the ranking exercise: Akayla Ashley, Stephanie Pearson, Jamal, Gavin Foster, Daniel Caleb Birch, Nathan, Ogaga Iziein, Chanique, Lewis Gray; for his contribution to the design of the ranking exercise and for facilitating the Discussion group: Stephen Sealy; for their contributions and insights during the Curriculum Manager Interviews: Lynden Davis, Joanne Austin, Norman Bartlett and Charmaine Kokeou. Also thanks go to Jane Dobson, Director Skills for Life, CoNEL and Fardt Ahmed, Research and Data Analyst at CoNEL, for partnering this project and providing access to their data.

References


DFES, Black Pupils’ Achievement Programme, The Standards Site, www.dfes.org.uk


Spirituality and Students with Particular Needs: Exploring Staff and Learner Voice

Andrew Coleby, Heather Pike and Richard Wales, Abingdon and Witney College

Executive Summary

There is considerable interest in both the needs of students with disabilities and in the spiritual and moral development of all FE students. This study uses a two-tier model of “formative” and “transformative” spirituality derived from a recent study of young people’s worldviews. “Formative” spirituality might be described as moral development; “transformative” spirituality is closer to religious practice but is broader. The project focussed on the views of staff and students at Abingdon and Witney College which is a regional centre for students with profound and multiple disabilities. The research found that staff in Step One (students with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties) had the clearest and most articulate commitment to the formative spiritual development of their students, despite the challenges of working with this group. Some opportunities to explore transformative spirituality at the college are provided by Diversity Week, the enrichment programme, the ESOL home hospitality scheme and the tutorial system. However, not all these opportunities are necessarily taken up by the students. The common assumption that colleges are able to address the spiritual and moral development of their students, including those with particular needs on their own, without a statutory basis or the involvement of other agencies is vindicated by this research project.

Introduction

There is currently a growing interest in the moral and spiritual development of students across the FE sector and a lively debate about how best to foster it. In 2005, the LSC published a ground-breaking handbook and CEL itself has followed this with its “Faith Communities Toolkit” (CEL 2006). The former argued that multi-faith chaplaincy teams was the best way forward and other bodies such as the National Ecumenical Agency in Further Education (NEAFE) are involved in trying to implement this agenda. Coinciding with this, there is also a concern to enhance access and involvement in the FE sector for those with disabilities, either physical or intellectual (LSC 2006).

Yet, there is a lack of overlap between the two LSC documents and the agendas that flow from them. Those with disabilities and their particular spiritual needs are barely mentioned in the handbook and spiritual and moral development hardly appear at all in LSC (2006). The aim of this research project is to bring these two areas of interest together and explore the spiritual development of students with particular needs in the

Appendix 1: Toolkit for Curriculum Staff

The following list is the result of consultation with students who attended the Discussion Group and put forward their suggested solutions to issues they believe are contributory factors to underachievement for all students. This “toolkit” will be forwarded to the SMT to consider and report back on at a later time.

1. Highlight vocational and other opportunities other than university.
2. Ensure more English language, literacy and numeracy skills are delivered and less music and sport.
3. Host more diverse cultural events to raise awareness of the multicultural environment in which we live and work.
4. Have more Black male tutors as role models.
5. Consult a larger cohort of students and collect their views on underachievement as, without these, discussion on underachievement has limited value.
6. Ensure EMA payments system is more robust and students receive their entitlements on time as the financial impact of this system can have a direct effect on attendance and consequently achievement rates.

References


The word “holistic” is used in a number of places but in each context it is clear that something like “joined-up government” rather than any spiritual implication is intended.
Research Framework

There is something of a methodological vacuum in the subject of spirituality in the FE sector. Ofsted purports to give weight to spiritual and moral development in its current inspections of colleges. This project is based on the theoretical framework found in a recent report on the spirituality of 15 to 25 year-olds (Savage et al 2006). The report makes a useful distinction between what it calls "formative" and "transformative" spirituality. This could be seen as another way of talking about moral development. "Formative spirituality" denotes the sense of self, relationship to others and relatedness to the world/universe, which represents a common human quality. "Transformative spirituality" involves the individual in deliberate practices (religious or otherwise) which aim to foster mindfulness of the "Other" (be that God, the transcendent or Ultimate Reality). All education could be contributing in one way or another to formative spirituality, though may not involve transformative spirituality. Facilities for the exploration of transformative spirituality in one or more of its many guises should, arguably, be available in an institution which aspires to provide a well-rounded educational experience for its students.

This project explores how far these two sorts of spirituality are being promoted in a single institution amongst students with particular educational needs. The study is intended as a contribution to the research on spirituality in the FE sector and to consider the implications of the research findings for those with leadership and management responsibilities in the sector.

This research focuses on students with special needs, who have additional support needs and also on those for whom English is a second language. The purposes of clarity, the study considers these two groups together as "students with particular educational needs." Within this broader heading, the study does not include students with only physical disabilities, whose spiritual and moral development, like other aspects of their education, are likely to be more constrained by practical matters to do with the design and lay-out of buildings and facilities, rather than the issues which are the main focus of this research.

Abingdon and Witney College is a medium sized college in Oxfordshire with 3 sites in Abingdon, Witney, and with a land-based provision in a village 2 miles outside Witney. There is provision for students with special needs at Abingdon and at the Witney site. The unit for students with profound and multiple learning difficulties at Witney arose out of a local community fund-raising project which was later integrated into the college's supported learning programmes. The unit continues to attract local community engagement and interest from the Witney store, which has recently fundraised for the unit and from the local Rotary club. Courses for students of English as a second language (ESOL) are mainly based in Abingdon.

The college has a successful history of including large numbers of students with special needs, with seventy-two students currently enrolled in Steps One to Four. It has recently been designated as a lead partner in "Action for Inclusion" for work with students with profound and multiple disabilities (PMLD), with a forty thousand pound grant from the LSC to enhance its provision. Its Step One provision aims to become renowned as a centre of excellence. The college has recently developed a partnership arrangement with a unit teaching people with autism in the 16-25 age group. It also has a good record in the area of teaching English to speakers of other languages with an in-take of about sixty new students each academic year. The college has recently embarked upon an initiative to enhance spiritual development among its students by appointing a Faiths Co-ordinator, or chaplain, to lead an ecumenical chaplaincy team.

The rationale of this project is to consider the effectiveness of this college's provision for the spiritual needs of the cohort specified in a way that is fruitful, not only for the college itself, but also for leaders of the FE sector as a whole. This study examines the meaning of spiritual development in the FE context, how the spiritual development of students with particular needs is being addressed and how this might be improved. Curriculum staff were consulted to examine the extent to which they perceive that they are currently meeting students' spiritual needs, and the involvement of such students in the opportunities that already exist for spiritual development was examined.

Attempts were also made to hear the student voice in this area, despite some practical problems that this involved, to begin to assess how important spiritual and moral development might be to the students themselves and how they regard what the college offers.
Research Methods

It was decided to apply the model of formative and transformative spirituality to the students with special needs as a first stage and then to seek to research the ESOL students if time allowed. Because of the nature of the research, the first approach was via the staff involved rather than the students concerned. The model of research for the students with special needs therefore looked like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>Obtain permissions. Write questionnaire and covering letter. Base the questions on the theoretical model of spirituality.</td>
<td>Ongoing background research started.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection</td>
<td>Questionnaires sent out. Questionnaires sent again to non-responders and then the staff from the specialist Autism unit.</td>
<td>44 sent to all full-time, part-time, teaching and support staff. A total of 54 questionnaires has now been sent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Results and the nature of the contributors looked at.</td>
<td>A data table and some charts made.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up</td>
<td>An attempt was made to hear the student voice.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications</td>
<td>What can be gleaned? What are the management implications?</td>
<td>Interview three senior managers on the findings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to obtain some comparative data from other colleges, a notice was placed in the “Faiths in Further Education Forum (FIFE) newsletter.” A positive response to this was followed up by a visit to the chaplain of the National Star College near Cheltenham, to observe him at work and to see if comparative data might be forthcoming. However, it became apparent that this specialist disability college, with a ratio of staff to students of two to one, was simply too different to provide a valuable comparison relevant to the wider FE sector. There has however been liaison with a number of chaplains in other more comparable colleges, with a view to obtaining comparative data, though the relatively short time-frame of this research project precluded any systematic comparison with other colleges.

A literature search has been conducted around the subject of spirituality and special needs and the publications of Abingdon and Witney College have been scrutinised. The researcher also spent several days acting as a teaching assistant among students in Steps One to Four, spending most time with the PMLD (Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties) students of Step One. Anecdotal and factual evidence relevant to the theoretical model was also obtained from the members of the research team.

The questionnaire used to gather data was designed specifically for this research project. It was not modelled on any other and was kept deliberately short and direct. It was drafted with care to show that something far broader than religious practice was referred to by “spirituality” with the intention that staff who would not see themselves as religious or even “spiritual” would not be put off from completing it. This questionnaire is shown in Appendix 1. After four questions about spirituality, the target staff were then asked in the questionnaire to specify in which “Step” they taught, whether they were involved in spirituality, religion or practised a faith themselves, and whether they would be prepared to undergo a recorded follow-up interview.
Research Findings

Staff Voice

The survey of staff of students with special needs received 12 responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Number</th>
<th>Question one</th>
<th>Question two</th>
<th>Question three</th>
<th>Question four</th>
<th>Step No.</th>
<th>Religious stance</th>
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Key to responses:
- A= Ability of Students
- B= Nature of Syllabus
- C= Other
- Y= Yes
- N= No
- T= Training
- Adv= Advice
- L= Literature
- Other

Religious Stance: RA= Actively religious; RN= non-active religious; S=spiritual; NRS= neither religious nor spiritual; NC= no comment.

Explanation of particular responses:
Q2: Response 3 wanted an appropriate 'enrichment activity'; Response 9 wanted funding for art materials.
Q3 'Other' comprised: more time in the week to devote to students' spiritual development; smaller student groups; help with involving families and carers; greater wheel-chair access; lap-tops, head-phones, videos and talking books.

Chart showing the breakdown of respondents by Step Category

The Steps are characterised as follows:

**Step One:** students with the most profound and multiple learning difficulties.

**Step Two:** Guided Opportunities and Access to Learning for students with severe learning difficulties, who may also have additional disabilities.

**Step Three:** Towards independence and skills for work: for students who are able to develop a range of skills to enable them to become independent in a supportive environment.

**Step Four:** Initial skills for work: for students who are working towards and are:
- already independent in a safe and supportive environment
- able to communicate effectively with familiar and unfamiliar people
- able to develop the ability and desire to become sufficiently independent and confident in the community for either paid or voluntary work to be a real option.

Chart showing the Religious Stance of the respondents
From the answers to question one, all of the respondents identify formative spirituality within their work with students who have special needs. Staff had been encouraged to annotate their responses and it was clear that tutorial work and the personal development education of Step One was responsible for this 100% positive response. From the responses to question two, the staff clearly thought that the understanding of their students was the main limitation to the understanding of formative spirituality. To help them with their work staff felt that they would benefit mostly from training and resources (question three). Most of the staff could not identify transformative spirituality even in informal discussion with their students. However, the responses to question four do show that 42% of respondents have identified some reference to transformative spirituality. In other words, the negative conclusion with respect to the presence of transformative spirituality is not as strong as the 100% positive identification of formative spirituality from question one.

Staff respondents represented each of the Step curriculum areas. However, Steps 2 and 3 were underrepresented. Perhaps the high level of response from Step One was due to the presence of the researcher on this area as a Learning Support Assistant (LSA). When the personal stance of respondents was gathered, it was clear that the group of respondents might not be representative. Of the twelve, three described themselves as actively practicing a religion, a further three described themselves as religious but not actively so; three more described themselves as “spiritual”, while only the remaining three professed to be neither religious or spiritual or left no indication on the matter. Therefore, the research has thrown up a predominantly interested group of staff for whom matters of formative and transformative spirituality were generally second nature. The untypical nature of the responding group, compared with that of the population of the country as a whole, needs to be borne in mind in everything that follows.

This group may be typical of the staff at Abingdon and Witney College but there is no HR data about the faith stance of staff to confirm this. Equally, the nature of the respondent group may be due to the way that the research was carried out. The data resulted from individual interpretation of the questionnaire and it may be that staff who were comfortable with concepts of spirituality were the most likely to respond. Perhaps a larger and more representative respondent group would have been obtained if all staff had been approached in person to have the questions talked through and responses made on the spot.

**Student Voice**

The student voice on the subject of spiritual development was sought for students with special needs. A survey questionnaire on “Values, Beliefs and Faiths”, which had been run nationally in FE colleges at the same time as this research project (NEAFE, 2007), was adapted for a tutorial group made up of six students with moderate learning difficulties in Step Three. This group was chosen because of the detailed responses from the staff to the first general questionnaire. It was challenging to seek the student voice because of the level of cognitive ability of the students and the danger, of which the tutor concerned was fully aware, “of putting ideas into their heads.”

The original NEAFE questions can be found in Appendix 2. The content of the questions was adapted to ensure the understanding of those students researched during a tutorial discussion at Abingdon and Witney College. The exercise yielded some clear results. For instance, the responses to questions 3 and 4 (see Appendix 2) were quite striking. All students answered “yes” to Q3 saying that the College should recognise in some way that values, beliefs and faiths are important to some people. In response to Q4, they agreed that, apart from their tutorial sessions, it might be good to have a religious discussion group or club on their campus at Witney.

**Formative and Transformative Spirituality**

This section combines data from all aspects of the research: the questionnaires, reading and anecdote. First, what evidence is there of a serious engagement at the College with the formative spiritual development of students with particular educational needs? Of the staff who responded to the survey, 100% identified formative spirituality in their work. In some official documents it is also possible to identify formative spirituality. For example, in the 2007 full-time student college prospectus, the section covering Step Two contains what could well be used as a working definition of formative spirituality amongst the course aims:

- A greater awareness of immediate aspects of their lives and their environments.
- Their ability to make choices and communicate that choice to other people.
- Greater awareness of the world around them.

(Abingdon and Witney 2006a, p.66)

The questionnaire data reveal that all those taking part in the research confirm that formative spirituality is covered in their work with students but the unevenness of the questionnaire response and the unevenness of the responses in the case of Step One (the PMLD students), the evidence is quite full and some reasonably firm conclusions can be drawn.

The responses from Step One staff were amongst the fullest received and can be supplemented by the direct classroom observations of the researcher. The objectives outlined in the prospectus, although relating in the first instance to Step Two, are actually also at the centre of the education offered to the severely disabled students in Step One. The second bullet point of the aims is more difficult to achieve in Step One, in that the students are almost entirely non-verbal. Nevertheless, the staff are ingenious and patient in working towards this objective. At this level, this sort of personal development is a good example of formative spirituality.

1 It took longer than expected to obtain results and make the follow-up survey with staff and students from the Steps areas of the curriculum. As a result, staff from the ESOL teaching area were not systematically surveyed given the timescale for this project. However, anecdotal evidence from this area will be included in the following section.
That the staff are aware of this is clear from their responses. One therapist wrote about her work, “Building a stronger sense of self [i] making them aware of the magic of a sense of connection with another person/other people [i] making music and dance together, non-verbal.” She further comments, “In some ways my students . . . are easier to connect with [i] they do not have the armour of defensiveness ‘normal’ people often have.” Another teacher in Step One describes “Building [the students’] confidence [and] self-esteem, to overcome the problem of their feeling ‘negative about themselves.” For Step One, it can be confidently asserted that there is a serious and self-conscious engagement with the formative spiritual development of the students, interpreting the curriculum to overcome the barriers which their level of disability places upon such engagement.

Paradoxically, with Steps Two to Four where the abilities of the students are much greater, the evidence of serious engagement with formative spiritual development is thinner because there was less annotation of the questionnaire responses. However, it might be argued that, if formative spiritual development is occurring in Step One, by far the most challenging context, then it must be happening in Steps Two-Four. But such a view is speculative. There are potentially greater opportunities for a more extensive spiritual development in Steps Two-Four provided by the tutorial system, in which all these students are included, as are all the ESOL students. This was mentioned by three of the non-Step One staff taking part in the study. These weekly time-tabled sessions with a tutor group, which are a common feature across the FE sector, offer an ideal opportunity to explore spiritual development. Yet it is not clear that this is the case. A tutorial curriculum plan does exist, monitored by a quality team, but it contains very little that relates to either sort of spirituality (Abingdon and Witney College 2006b).

It is planned to introduce a more structured tutorial curriculum in September 2007, after the period of this research. Heather Pike (project leader) has a central role in the introduction of this new curriculum and so more mention of matters spiritual may be made. A tutor’s guide to religious festivals was produced in 2002 (Abingdon and Witney College 2002). It is hard to assess what impact this has had. Nevertheless, religious festivals are now listed in the diaries that are issued free to all students. According to one tutor, tutorials can cover world or local news and “Students are encouraged – within their ability – to discuss issues – climate change, ethnic differences.” The same tutor warns that the “very small” lives that these students lead has a limiting impact on the tutorial programme. That said, this tutorial group is the only one so far to have tackled the Beliefs, Values and Faiths questionnaire.

With regard to the subject of transformative spirituality, the issues and possibilities are rather different. In a school context, this would be catered for by collective worship and RE. But, the FE sector is currently free from any statutory obligation to deliver these. RE is taught in some FE colleges, but Abingdon and Witney is not among them.

The following questions will now be addressed: what opportunities do students with particular educational needs have for exploring different forms of transformative spirituality at the College, how are these opportunities made available, and what sort of up-take is there for the opportunities offered?

To answer the first question, it is clear from the survey questionnaire that a small majority of respondents had not seen any opportunities for understanding transformative spirituality at the College. However, the rest of the research methodology has revealed that the following opportunities existed:

- Diversity Week,
- the enrichment programme,
- the ESOL home hospitality scheme, and
- the tutorial system for all students.

Diversity Week is organised each February, and potentially provides a major learning opportunity about transformative spiritualities. In 2006, this included talks about Islam and Buddhism, given by adherents . . . poem of William Blake. In the 2007 Diversity Week programme, five sessions about Islam and Arabic writing were planned.

Another opportunity for transformative spirituality is provided by the enrichment programme. Until recently, this has not been extensive at this college. However, during the period of this present research, the appointments of those particular faiths. The week also included what might be seen as an act of collective worship in a multi-faith context. One of the opening meetings of the week, attended by a large number of ESOL students, was preceded by two minutes of silence in memory of a Polish student, who had tragically died the month before. The silence was introduced by the reading of a religious poem of William Blake. In the 2007 Diversity Week programme, five sessions about Islam and Arabic writing were planned.

Another opportunity for transformative spirituality is provided by the enrichment programme. Until recently, this has not been extensive at this college. However, during the period of this present research, it has been revived and part of that has been in the form of a Christian discussion group which meets weekly. Eight students contacted the group and five became regular attendees. The meetings have included prayer, Bible study and some fund-raising for the developing world.

Thirdly, in terms of transformative spirituality, a home hospitality scheme for ESOL students offers a variety of possibilities. This was originated by a welcome tea-party for the new in-take of these students. Forty new students attended and twenty-seven of them signed up for a “home hospitality scheme”, organised through a local Anglican Church, which had the approval of the relevant Programme Area Manager at the college. Students who signed up were matched up with host families living locally, who entertained them with one or more meals in their homes, during the course of the academic year. Hosts had previously been given some basic training in inter-cultural sensitivity and every effort was made to match up student guests with appropriate hosts so that both would feel comfortable. Hosts were also issued with feed-back forms, to give some indication of how the scheme had worked. Four families were returned in connection with eight student guests. It appears that a good number of the students who had signed up already subscribed to a transformative spirituality, in
particular Islam. In such a context, care and sensitivity are required on the part of hosts, who have been warned to avoid proselytising. However, it can be said that there have been opportunities for students to find out about the transformative spirituality of their hosts, either through conversation or subsequent attendance at worship events, if they chose to do so.

Fourthly, the tutorial system has the potential for exploring transformative spiritualities. In the Step Three tutorial group referred to above, not only was the Beliefs questionnaire tackled, but time was also spent looking in a fairly systematic way at Judaism. Five out of the six non-Step One staff involved in the study mention the presence of students who subscribe to a particular form of transformative spirituality in their classes or tutor groups, although from the responses, this does not generally seem to have been seen as an opportunity for learning for other students in the group. It was simply noted in one case that when a particular student mentions the church she attends, "the others tend to groan", with no further comment. Another tutor comments, "I believe the students should be encouraged to be aware of different faiths and cultures etc." Overall, therefore, it is not clear that experience of transformative spirituality is happening widely or generally through the tutorial system.

How are the opportunities to explore transformative spiritualities made available? Diversity Week is run by the Equality and Diversity Co-ordinator, who is knowledgeable about transformative spiritualities and who works closely with the Faiths (Chaplaincy) Team. The latter are responsible for the Christian group in the revised enrichment programme. The tutor group that has been actively exploring transformative spiritualities is the responsibility of a highly motivated tutor. Tutorial resources which promoted transformative spirituality have been provided in the past, the students' diary and College Intranet still provide relevant resources for this purpose.

It is one thing to provide opportunities for students, including those with particular needs, to explore transformative spirituality, but quite another for them to actually take them. Furthermore, it should not be assumed that any group of students is necessarily more open to exploring different forms of transformative spirituality than any other group. At Abingdon and Witney College, despite several students with learning difficulties expressing curiosity about the Christian group, none has yet joined it. Twenty ESOL students have accessed the home hospitality scheme (some students who originally signed up did not receive hospitality for a variety of reasons). However, from the hosts' feedback forms, it appears that opportunities to explore transformative spirituality have not often been taken up. One Buddhist student has attended services at church on two occasions and has expressed an interest in attending other church events. Nevertheless, the meals and home visits may have been socially significant for the students involved and may have contributed to their transformative spirituality. Students from all backgrounds and with all levels of ability have supported Diversity Week. In fact, over the last three years the numbers attending events have increased to over 500 in 2007.

It might be concluded from the above that colleges in general and this college in particular often ignore transformative spirituality. Nevertheless, on the basis of the NEAFE survey, it is evident that students are interested. All six surveyed at Abingdon and Witney answered yes to question 3 (see Appendix 2) and most were positive about question 4. Nationally, 66% of those that responded gave an affirmative answer to question 3 (NEAFE 2007).

Conclusion

There is currently much debate about the spiritual and moral development of students in the FE sector, but this debate suffers from a lack of clarity over the definition of spirituality. The LSC, Ofsted and senior managers in the sector need to clarify what they mean by "spirituality." Funders and legislators must recognise that any requirement to introduce spirituality into the FE sector should be based on a clear definition of the terminology.

This research has used a basic working definition based on a distinction between formative and transformative spirituality. It is not the only possible model, however it has been found to be understandable by the staff at Abingdon and Witney College. Therefore, this distinction is useful in FE and it allows for the recognition that formative spiritual development is already taking place.

In the course of this research, the challenges of evidence gathering in this area have been revealed. Senior managers need to take a close interest in what their college already offers by way of spiritual development and devise strategies for auditing this. One possibility would be to have a college development day devoted to this specific subject.

Even in a college with an active Equality and Diversity Co-ordinator and a new developing chaplaincy team, opportunities to explore transformative spirituality are still limited especially for students with particular needs. However, these students should not be assumed to be more or less interested in these matters than their peers, and nationally, the FE student body has recently been shown to be largely in support of opportunities to express and explore transformative spirituality in colleges (NEAFE 2007). Formative spirituality is present in numerous ways for all college students regardless of their background (ESOL) or ability (special needs).

Acknowledgments

The project team would like to thank staff at Abingdon and Witney College and particularly Lesley Floyd for their assistance with this research. We would also like to thank the staff of the Bodleian Library and Blackwell's Bookshop, Oxford for their help in tracking down the more obscure works relating to spirituality and particular needs.

References


Appendix 1: The Questionnaire Designed for this Research

Spirituality and Special Needs Questionnaire.

A recent report on young people’s worldviews helpfully distinguished between two levels of spirituality: what we might call spirituality with a small ‘s’ and Spirituality with a big ‘S’. In spirituality with a small ‘s’ we are seeking to enhance a student’s sense of self, their relatedness to others and their sense of relatedness to the world/universe. The latter may include a sense of mystery, awe and wonder. Spirituality with a big ‘S’ involves the individual in deliberate practices (whether overtly religious or not) aimed at fostering an awareness of the ‘Other’ (i.e. God, Ultimate Reality etc). The following questions are designed to explore how the spirituality (in both senses) of our students with special needs is being addressed at this college:

1. Does the teaching that you are involved with contribute to the spirituality with a small ‘s’ of the students involved? If Yes, can you give examples? If No, can you say why?

2. What are the particular challenges of addressing the spiritual development (small ‘s’) of the students with whom you deal? Please give details.

3. What resources, be they training, advice or literature might be helpful in addressing the spiritual development of students in this sense? Or do you find you have all you need?

4. Do issues of Spirituality with a big ‘S’ ever come up either in formal teaching contexts or in more informal contacts with students? If so, how are these addressed? (Again detailed examples would be helpful).

Appendix 2: Beliefs, Values and Faiths Survey (NEAFE, 2007)

1. Are issues to do with values, beliefs and faiths important to you in your life?

2. Are they important to any of your friends or work colleagues?

3. Whether or not these issues are important to you personally, do you think your college or workplace should recognise in some way that values, beliefs and faiths are important to some people?

4. If Yes, what sort of facilities and support could your college or workplace provide to cater for people’s values, beliefs and faith needs?

5. Do you think FE colleges and workplaces should provide support and services for students/trainees who hold different values, beliefs and faiths?

6. Are you or your friends or work colleagues more or less likely to feel part of a college or workplace that encourage dialogue and activities between people and communities of diverse values, beliefs and faiths?
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