

Can Self-Advocacy Skills Support Young People to Participate in Person-Centred Planning? An Example from Research Involving Young People With Dyslexia

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Abstract

Changes to national legislation in England have resulted in a cultural shift towards ensuring children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities are held at the centre of assessment and planning. The promotion of person-centred approaches within the Code of Practice is a welcome addition to many within the educational community. However, little consideration has been given to how professionals can ensure children and young people are maximally involved within this process. This is of significant concern when considered in the context of research which shows children with additional needs often lack the necessary skills to participate meaningfully in the planning of their educational provision. This article draws upon research in which young people with dyslexia were interviewed about the planning for and outcomes of their transition to secondary school. The implications of this research indicated that self-advocacy skills can be an important element in enabling young people to more competently contribute to transition planning. A range of self-advocacy skills are considered in the context of enabling young people to participate in person-centred planning. Practical ideas are outlined which are aimed at professionals wanting to help young people to develop self-advocacy skills, which could empower them to take a more active role in contributing to planning their support and educational provision.

Keywords: person-centred planning, self-advocacy, dyslexia, transition

Legislative Context

In England, a radical reform of educational and health support for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) has taken place. This national overhaul has prompted a distinct shift towards ensuring children and young people are at the centre of any decisions relating to their SEND provision, support, and planning. The Children and Families Act Part 3 — Children with SEND (DfE, 2014) states that Local Authorities must have regard for: (a) the views, wishes and feelings of the child and his or her parent, or the young person; (b) the importance of the child and his or her parent, or the young person participating as fully as possible in decisions relating to the exercise of the function concerned. This ethos is upheld throughout the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DH, 2015), where reference is repeatedly made to the importance of having the needs of the individual child or young person at the heart of any assessment or planning. It advocates a person-centred approach in which "local authorities must have regard to the views, wishes and feelings of the child, child's parent or young person, their aspirations, the outcomes they wish to seek and the support they need to achieve them" (p. 147).

The Code of Practice has placed the expectation on Local Authorities and professionals to develop child-centred systems which enable children and young people to participate in the assessment and planning process. This person-centred approach should:

- *focus on the child or young person as an individual;*
- *enable children and young people and their parents to express their views, wishes and feelings;*
- *enable children and young people and their parents to be part of the decision-making process...*
- *...highlight the child or young person's strengths and capabilities.*

(DfE & DH, 2015, p. 148)

Person-Centred Approaches

Person-centred approaches form part of a broader social movement to empower frequently marginalised groups to move from a culture of dependency to one of choice and independence. By listening to what individuals want, person-centred approaches are a way of commissioning, providing and organising support in a way which helps the person work towards aspirations that are meaningful to them. Person-centred approaches were originally developed

within the field of social care, and there is a growing body of literature which relates to its effective use with client groups such as adults with learning disabilities and the elderly (Sanderson & Lewis, 2012; Robertson et al., 2005). Tools such as person-centred planning have been shown to have a positive effect on personal outcomes for the individuals involved. However, as Birney (2015) points out, there have been far less literature and research which explore how person-centred approaches can be used with children and young people both practically and in terms of efficacy.

Developing Person-Centred Planning With Children and Young People

While the Code of Practice (DfE & DH, 2015) promotes professionals working with children and young people with SEND to develop person-centred systems which allow them to participate more fully, it does not refer to *how* they should be enabled to participate. Without the proper consideration of how person-centred approaches (typically used with adults) will translate to children and young people, there is a risk that this approach will not lead to the same meaningful outcomes. Claes et al. (2010) note that when implemented inadequately, person-centred planning risks becoming a paper exercise, which is no longer driven by the individual and therefore will likely fail to increase independence, choice and inclusion. Kaehne and Beyer argue that a critical factor for person-centred planning to be effective is for the process to be properly accessible to the child or young person.

The shift towards a person-centred culture in our schools effectively means that children and young people with SEND will be required to advocate for themselves if they are to fully participate in decision making, such as at person-centred reviews. It is a concern, then, that research tells us that students with additional needs often lack the necessary skills and self-awareness to be active participants and to express desires and aspirations related to their educational future and ongoing support (Arndt, Konrad, & Test, 2006; Schreiner, 2007). In order for children and young people with SEND to be equal partners within the person-centred processes espoused within the Code of Practice, we must first give them the necessary tools to fully participate.

Promoting Self-Advocacy Skills to Increase the Participation of Young People

One possible way for children and young people to become better able to participate more meaningfully in planning is for them to develop self-advocacy (Cummings, Maddux, & Casey, 2000; Van Reusen, 1998). Self-advocacy can be defined as a person's ability to effectively articulate, communicate and negotiate their own desires, goals, interests, needs and rights (Cummings et al., 2000). Common elements include: understanding one's own special educational needs including their strengths and weaknesses; knowledge of individual rights; ability to successfully request accommodations or support; and effective leadership skills (Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer & Eddy, 2005). Essentially, self-advocacy for children and young people includes having the right knowledge and self-awareness, as well as the ability to communicate this to others in order to request provisions which leads to a successful educational experience (Pocock, et al., 2002). Educational research over the last two decades has established that self-advocacy is an important skill for students with SEND to learn in order to be successful, and links have been found between self-advocacy and academic attainment, school completion and outcomes following post-secondary transition. Importantly, Test, Fowler, Brewer, and Wood (2005) have reported evidence that individuals with a variety of SEND can learn self-advocacy skills. In this sense teaching children and young people to become self-advocates could potentially provide them with the skills to become better prepared and able to participate in person-centred planning.

Self-Advocacy Can Lead to Participation — Outcomes From Research Involving Students With Dyslexia

While the development of self-advocacy skills to promote participation in person-centred planning could be relevant for all children and young people with SEND, this article will narrow its focus to the area of dyslexia. This is done to draw upon the author's doctoral research, which sought to explore how students with dyslexia could better participate in their own planning for the transition to secondary school. This was achieved through interviews with students with dyslexia, and ultimately led to a range of practical ideas for developing self-advocacy skills and greater ability to more fully participate in their own planning. All of the ideas outlined are based upon what the students themselves said was, or would have been, helpful as part of their own planning for the transition to secondary school. These ideas are organised as questions which professionals could ask themselves when preparing for a young person to participate within person-centred planning.

Do They Have a Good Understanding of Their Own Needs?

"It's like, it doesn't, it's not a bad thing it's like...it's something that doesn't make you...like it it's hard to describe."
(Jesse, line 216).

Arguably, one of the most important elements for enabling children and young people to meaningfully participate in reviews and planning would be for them to have a good understanding of their own special educational needs. Yet, the majority of young people interviewed revealed that they found it difficult to explain what it meant to have dyslexia and how it impacted upon them. Often the young people reported that they were given little or no information about

dyslexia at the time of their diagnosis or since. A number of them also spoke about feeling uncomfortable talking to adults and their peers because they lacked the skills to clearly communicate their specific difficulties to others.

In order to address this issue within the research, a resource was co-created with the young people to support students to better understand their own diagnosis and to also develop a script which helped them to speak about their strengths and difficulties. This resource included a child-friendly explanation of dyslexia which consisted of an adaptation of the Rose (2009) definition, which utilised simple and clear language. It also included examples about dyslexia given by the young people themselves. They were keen that the explanation emphasised the strengths of people with dyslexia, as well as the things they may find difficult. To help them speak about dyslexia to others, the young people wanted a tool which would help them to build a script that was personal to them. They felt that it would be too difficult to write this from scratch, and therefore wanted to be able to select from a range of pre-generated sentences which they could put together in order to formulate their own script. A sample of this script builder is included below as an example. Overall the young people felt this material could support students to be better able to tell others about their dyslexia, explain the specific nature of their strengths and needs, and therefore be able to participate in any planning processes.

Figure 1. Sample of script builder resource developed with young people with dyslexia

I would like to tell you that I have dyslexia. Having dyslexia means that...

	I find reading difficult
	It takes me longer to read things
	The letters move about on the page when I read
	I find writing hard
	It takes me longer to write things
	I find it hard to spell some words

Dyslexia is not only to do with reading and writing, it also means that...

	Sometimes it takes me longer to process what people say
	It makes it difficult for me to remember things
	Remembering what people say is hard
	I get nervous about speaking in front of the rest of the class
	Being organised can be a challenge

Things that help me include...

	When adults help me read and write
	Going out of class for extra help
	When my friends help me read
	When friends help me with spelling

I would also like you to know that...

	Dyslexia is not a bad thing
	People with dyslexia are born with it
	Having dyslexia means a small part of your brain works in a different way
	People with dyslexia are good at loads of things besides reading or writing

Thank you very much for listening, is there anything you would like to ask me about dyslexia?

(Kelly, 2015)

While the example outlined here relates to young people with dyslexia, self-awareness of one's special needs or disability has been shown to be a key factor relating to positive educational outcomes (Pocock, et al., 2002). If parents and professionals working with children and young people with SEND are able to support them to better understand their own needs, arguably they will be in a better position to contribute more equally within a person-centred approach. The resource outlined to promote young people with dyslexia to gain greater self-awareness could easily be recreated for other groups of students with SEND, or, alternatively, a similar resource could be made with a child or young person at an individual level.

Can the Young Person Tell You the Support That Is Useful to Them?

"I do not need that, but maybe that would help, you know pointing out things that you think would help, and do not be afraid to say." (Hank, line 249)

One important finding was that when young people better understood their own difficulties and were more confident explaining dyslexia to others, they reported being better able to speak with adults about what support they felt would be useful. The young people noted that it was easier to speak about their ongoing support when they felt teachers also had a clear understanding of their specific strengths and needs, and would therefore be more accepting of what they required. The young people described various positive outcomes from being able to speak about their own support, and they felt it was important for other students with dyslexia to have the necessary communication skills and confidence to do so. However, many of the young people reported feeling unable to speak about the support they wanted due to: a lack of clarity about their own needs; concerns that teachers were not fully aware of their needs; or a lack of opportunity to think critically about the support they would find helpful ahead of their transition planning.

This highlights the relevance of teaching young people self-advocacy skills in order for them to become more equal partners within person-centred planning. Common learning objectives within established programs which teach self-advocacy include being able to explain your difficulties to others, as well as being able to understand and outline the support which would be helpful to you (Merchant & Gajar, 1997; Test et al., 2005b). In this sense, developing a young person's skills in these areas could enable them to contribute towards decisions about their own provision and support.

In the context of the author's research, this was attempted by co-creating a resource which attempted to support students to feel more confident about talking to adults regarding the support they wanted. As part of this resource, students complete a questionnaire and self-scaling measure for various school subjects and tasks, which helps them to identify their strengths and areas of need. It also encourages students to identify strategies they currently use which enable them to be successful. With this increased self-knowledge, it is hoped students become clearer about the elements of school where they feel they have strategies to help themselves, as well as the areas where they feel further support is needed. Finally, students complete a summary page which they can use as a prompt when talking with adults, such as during a person-centred planning meeting.

Can They Tell You Their Strengths and What They Aspire to Work Towards?

"I think actually, I think erm your worri— you are kind of worried about it, and then when you get there you realise it was nothing to worry about." (Saul, line 148)

As is outlined in the Code of Practice, an important element of person-centred planning is to "highlight the child or young person's strengths and capabilities" (DfE & DH, 2015, p. 148). A key component of being a self-advocate involves being aware of the strengths which can support you (Test et al., 2005b). Through gaining greater knowledge of strengths, young people are more likely to be able to set goals or desired outcomes (Cummings et al., 2000) which they could potentially work towards, as part of a person-centred planning process.

When interviewed about their transition experiences, the young people often reported they had been better able to manage the demands of secondary school than they had anticipated. When they spoke about their actual experiences of adjusting to secondary school, they were able to identify many aspects about themselves which had been supportive in helping them to be successful. This tended to include approaches to learning which would typically be thought of as utilising the strengths of students with dyslexia, such as lessons that are practical or allow students to make use of verbal skills or physical resources. There was a clear discrepancy between how the young people believed they would cope and how they managed in reality. Most young people interviewed agreed it would have been helpful to have a greater awareness of their own strengths prior to planning for transition. Many felt being able to identify strengths within the planning process would make students with dyslexia more likely to attain outcomes that they set for themselves. Participants also felt it was important that students were empowered to create their own outcomes, rather than them being set by their teachers.

"So when you're doing like a personal target I think it would be easier...Because then you know what you what you need to do, not a teacher telling you what they want you to do" (Mike, lines 277–278)

One implication for professionals, then, is when seeking to include children and young people in person-centred planning, they may need opportunities to learn about their strengths and weaknesses. This may put them in a better position to more meaningfully contribute to how future support should be targeted, but also the aspirations and outcomes they want to attain. Within the context of the author's research, this was achieved by co-creating a self-

advocacy-based resource which supported students to begin thinking about their own strengths through completing a self-rating scale for range skills and attributes. This resource facilitates young people to develop goals which are important to them and encourages them to outline the strengths they can utilise in order to achieve this aspiration successfully.

Who Are People That Can Support the Young Person?

“Erm it made me feel a bit happy because my friends are supportive, because I told them and they were supportive, yeah.” (Holly, line 27)

A final outcome of the research was that in planning for an aspect of their educational experience (in this case, a transition to secondary school) young people often had better outcomes when they sought reassurance or information from their support network. The young people spoke about different parts of their network being supportive in different ways. For example, friends often formed part of the young person strategies to manage effectively within the classroom; parents and family members often featured as a source of emotional support. Interestingly, the young people often sought sources they felt had a genuine insight into the challenge they were preparing to face, showing a preference for speaking with older students, older sibling or others with dyslexia.

If we want young people to participate as fully as possible in person-centred planning then we need them to be in the strongest position possible to make their contribution. Professionals could go some way to achieving this by allowing the young person to draw upon the people who can support them. Successful self-advocates already have the skills to communicate with and gain support from others. However, other young people may require opportunities to consider who in their life can form part of a supportive network, as well as opportunities to learn or practice skills which can lead to them obtaining support from others. In the author’s research, it was possible to co-create a resource which helped young people to map out a support network of people and the ways in which each individual could assist them. It was hoped this would assist in them being able to obtain support effectively from a range of sources. Something similar could be done with young people preparing for a person-centred review or meeting. It could also be helpful to facilitate opportunities for young people to seek this social support directly. This could be in the lead up to a person-centred planning meeting, such as by facilitating time with older students or other young people with similar needs, allowing them to glean advice about what has been helpful for them. Alternatively, it might be beneficial to give the young person a degree of control as to who attends a meeting, allowing them to invite supportive peers or family members.

Conclusions

By drawing upon research involving young people with dyslexia and their planning for transition to secondary school, it has been possible to consider how promoting young people to become better self-advocates could enable them to more fully participate in the process of person-centred planning. While it is recognised that the outcomes of this research can only be generalised tentatively to the wider SEND community, it is possible to conceive how teaching young people self-advocacy skills would empower them to increase their contribution to meetings.

In particular, this article has considered the importance of young people attaining a greater level of self-awareness, particularly in relation to understanding their own special needs or disabilities, their strengths and the strategies which support them. Other elements of self-advocacy have also been explored as potential ways to increase participation, such as supporting young people to consider their aspirations, desired outcomes for the future, and helping them to become better able to draw upon their own resources and those within their support network.

Person-centred planning cannot happen on a piece of paper nor in a vacuum, but takes place through the investments we make in young people which inspires and empowers their contribution. On person-centred annual reviews, Hayes notes that when aiming to include a child or young person, adequate preparation is essential. Teaching young people self-advocacy skills could be one way to provide this preparation, but, equally, further research is needed to explore how other young people feel supported in order to participate in their own planning. A number of self-advocacy-based resources which were co-created with young people have been outlined within this article (to be published in due course). However, it will be important for a range of different resources to be developed with young people. This would give professionals a greater range of tools which support this preparation and ultimately improve children and young people’s access to person-centred planning.

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