

The Needs and Wants of Children and Young People with Physical Disabilities

Big Brum TIE - For PD net, June 2018



"I thought that if I showed a picture of them both then it would help them."

- Participant at Victoria School, Birmingham



Introduction

“If they could tell themselves, maybe they could make the story better.”

- Participant, Lancasterian School

This account of young people’s needs and wants arises from consultative sessions at Lancasterian School, Manchester and Treloars School, Hampshire in April 2018.

The sessions involved 40 young people from 12 schools. These young people were aged 6 to 18, with a wide range of physical disabilities. Their ideas have been supplemented with notes and observations from a further session in June, involving 20 young people at Victoria School, Birmingham.

The consultations used a Theatre in Education programme based on ‘Flee’ by Suriya Aisha to elicit young people’s reflections on their needs and wants. The programme focuses on two displaced young people, and their complex story formed a stimulus for a reflection on participants’ own needs and wants. By using exploratory theatre in this way, we sought to engage children at a profound level of ‘felt understanding’, rather than simply skimming the surface.

This written report accompanies a slide presentation from the sessions, which includes film extracts from John Bradburn and specially commissioned for the project by Big Brum.

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We would like to thank all of the children, young people and adults who participated in the consultation sessions.

What the young people told and showed us ...

... and what this might mean for adults who are in contact with them

1. **The young people told us** that it is not easy for any human being to articulate their needs and wants: that it is difficult for either children or adults to really know what they want and need, to know how the two things differ and to be really honest about it.

As adults ... we therefore need to listen actively and carefully to young people, and not always take things on face value. We need to keep asking ourselves: What lies behind what is being said? How can we find this out in a sensitive and respectful way? How can we resist the temptation to put 'correct' answers into their mouths?

"He was telling himself that his Dad was coming but really inside he knew he wasn't."
– Participant, Lancasterian School

2. **The young people told us, and demonstrated,** that individual young people often want and need different or even opposing things. There is not a single unified checklist for the needs and wants of young physically disabled people.

As adults ... we need to be providing personalised learning and support based on the individual needs of each young person.

"They're from the same world, but it's like they're from different universes."
– Participant, Treloars School

3. **The young people repeatedly demonstrated** that physically disabled young people can engage with the most profound and meaningful questions about their own humanity in an engaged and empathetic manner.

As adults ... We may need to adjust our expectations of what young people are able to think, feel and do, so as to recognise and respect their abilities and their humanity. We may also want to reflect on how we communicate these expectations.

"Billy wants a date with hope. The other one wants to experience an adult life, but he's wrong, he's still a child. He wants a date with business."
– Participant, Lancasterian School

4. **The young people told us** how important is it to them to feel safe and protected, both physically and emotionally.

As adults ... we need to pay attention to safety and safeguarding, while ensuring that our commitment to their wellbeing doesn't mean we are overprotecting young people. In particular, we need to ensure that young people have spaces where they can explore difficult questions in a safe and supportive environment.¹

¹ There is a growing body of educational research that demonstrates that it is important for children and young people to have spaces in which they can explore difficult issues in a safe and supportive environment;

"I think everyone deserves a good life, everyone deserves not to be waking up in some sort of a prison where they don't feel protected." – Participant, Lancasterian School

5. **The young people told us** about their frequent and profound feelings of aloneness, loneliness and the need to have people in their lives who they could trust: how crucial the role of their parents was to them; and how important it was to feel 'at home' in the world.

"When I am home, downstairs, by myself and the family are upstairs, I feel lost and alone." – Participant, Lancasterian School

As adults ... we need to reflect on how we best create relationships of warmth and trust with young people; how we can build strong partnerships between parents and organisations (especially schools); and the ways in which we might unintentionally exclude young people from feeling they belong (this includes how we use language and how we conduct ourselves, as well as practical questions e.g. about physical access or room layout).

"You are alone if nobody is around. You can be lonely even if people are around."
- Participant, Lancasterian School

6. **The young people told us** about the sort of 'normal life' that all children should have, with access to opportunities for education, play and friendship, and with freedom from physical and emotional harm.

"A normal happy childhood means: learning new things, skills, finding out about the world and space; making friends; going to school; reading, writing and having fun."
- Participant, Lancasterian School.

As adults ... we need to find ways to enable all children to secure their right to a full and meaningful life, to education and to participation in a wider society that can sometimes 'other' or pathologise them. We need to pay close attention to their personal and educational as well as their medical needs.²

"A happy life is love and working with what you have and just enjoying it and having fun." – Participant, Treloars School

that the desire to avoid such exploration in order to 'protect' children, while understandable, is often counter-productive; and that the provision of such 'safe' spaces can have positive benefits for young people's mental health and wellbeing (the converse also being true). Some of this research applies to special school settings. For example, Ballin, McGuire and Murphy (2018), *Towards an understanding of the contribution of global learning to the wellbeing and mental health of young people with special educational needs*, Global Learning Programme Innovation Fund Research Series: Paper 4. London: UCL / GLP.

² It is worth noting here that that Big Brum chose to emphasise the children's *humanity* rather than their *disability* during the consultation, and that the young people appear to have responded positively to this.

7. **The young people told us** that they are really alert to the world beyond themselves: that they have ideas about values, justice and human rights; and concerns about issues such as guns and crime, conflict and war, child labour, homelessness and the refugee crisis.

“The world is crazy” – Participant, Treloars School

As adults ... we need to ensure that young people have plentiful opportunities and spaces to explore their ideas, feelings and values about the world beyond themselves.

“After supper the boys went to watch TV with raised hopes of a better tomorrow, however this did not last long. On the TV they saw pictures of soldiers and tanks. Sam turned to Billy and said we have to stop the war soon before it is too late for peace. It’s up to the world to try to stop it.”

– Follow-up writing from participant, Treloars School

8. **The young people told us**, in a very open and honest manner, about personal issues that sometimes affect them, such as difficulties in dealing with change, about moments of anxiety and self-deception; about frequent poor or non- communication; but also about moments of courage and honesty.

“Maybe they build walls or dens inside themselves to give themselves courage.”

– Participant, Lancasterian School

As adults ... we need to tune in to the complex emotional lives of the young people we encounter.

*“Love is because you **know** the person and the person loves you more and then is like ... I don’t know ... Like my Mum loves me more, but you **like** people at the school but not like the kind of love your Mum gives you.” – Participant, Treloars School*

9. **The young people told us and showed us** that Drama and story and have an extraordinary power in helping them to explain their human situations to themselves, to each other and to those who will listen.

“I’d like the boys to tell the parents the whole story, because then the parents can understand ... we will never leave the kids to be like that again, never leave them ever alone.” – Participant, Lancasterian School

As adults ... we need to provide regular opportunities that use Drama and story to help young people articulate their feelings, ideas, needs and wants.³ We need to keep listening to what they tell us and show us as a result.

“It will take quite a time for me to collect all my thoughts. It’s quite a moving piece.”

– Participant, Treloars School

³ It was noticeable that the work had a clear and demonstrable impact on the adults present at the consultation sessions.