

## Improving Choices for Individuals

# Oaklands College/ Greenside School – Jack Smith, Bernie Hunt, Kerry Lowe, Dave Victor



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## Summary

This case study explores how a school (Greenside) a specialist provision within a mainstream college (Springfield at Oakland College) and the East and North Community Assessment Treatment Service Team worked in partnership to support a young man with Autism whose cyclical pattern (and recent record) of severe challenging behaviour led to him being unable to access education on the school site, placing him at risk of exclusion. This young man remained on the school role and initially was educated at a local respite provision. When this arrangement proved unsuccessful the young man spent his days at home with no direct input from outside agencies.

The aim was to explore the possibility of him accessing an early transition to college, as it was felt a return to school would not be in his best interests, given the memories it would hold for him. This would require a multi-agency approach if it was to work successfully.

## Key lessons learned

- Placing the young person at the centre of the planning has always been paramount in our practice; a priority is to address personal and emotional needs in order that the individual learns the requisite skills of socialisation and the adaptive behaviours needed in later life, as he or she moves through the various transitions associated with further education and adulthood. These, along with self-help and independence skills, underpin the skills required for academic learning.
- Staff assess on a daily basis as a team, review strategies on a 'what's working' 'what's not working basis'; involve the learner in the process and feedback to the parents as to progress and achievements.
- Flexibility such as a varied, experienced staff team, adaptable resources, supportive management, relevant funding opportunities and realistic but challenging expectations, whilst taking 'professional risks' and thinking outside the box are a necessity if we are to support individuals to progress to their full potential.

## Introduction

Oaklands College is based in Hertfordshire and Springfield is a specialist centre within the college. This provision is unique within the country in that it is the only College of Further Education (FE) to work with such a breadth of needs. Historically a lot of the students would have gone to specialist Out of County provision. The College played a major part in the Eastern Region's 'Improving Choice' pilot, which was aimed at supporting young people with complex needs to stay in the local county. Numbers have grown over the past 5 years from 15 to 93. We link with 8 local feeder schools, Greenside being one of them and 13 boroughs outside of Hertfordshire; such is the need for this provision. Personalised learning is at the centre of all that we do and we use a plethora of approaches in order to facilitate this such as Intensive Interaction, which underpins all approaches to learning within our Autistic provision.

Greenside Post 16 provision is designed to meet the needs of students with severe learning difficulties (SLD), profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD), Multi sensory Impairments (MSI) and Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as they reach 16. We pride ourselves in offering all students a 'bespoke' curriculum. We look at the needs of every individual and strive to meet those needs. We want to set up every young person to succeed, and we recognize that to do this it is ok for them to make mistakes along the way. Ultimately, we want to provide a safe but stimulating environment where our students can truly discover more about themselves, other people, and the world around them. Courses are aimed at maximising skills bases and learning experiences. The value of the Post 16 not only lies in the richness of the curriculum delivered and range of accredited courses offered, but also in the development social skills with other students and staff, community based opportunities such as work experience and collaborative learning experiences, college and inclusion, the Greenside Studio, enterprise projects and careers development and many more opportunities. The teaching philosophy at Greenside School embodies the rationale of the SPELL approach developed by the National Autistic Society; provision of a structured, positive, empathic and low-arousal environment with good links between school, home and outside agencies. However, in order to meet the needs of all pupils across the spectrum we use an eclectic mix of established and researched approaches and interventions; drawing on best practice and continuously monitoring and evaluating their use. Interventions and approaches include TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication handicapped Children), PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System), sensory diets and Intensive Interaction.

This project is just a small part of the work that we do in partnership with each other.

### What we wanted to achieve

The aim of the project was to enable this young man to return to an educational environment successfully so that he could access the full range of opportunities available to him and manage his own behaviour effectively in social situations.

It was felt that because the young man ruminates on changes to routine and/ or incidents the best way forward to support progression would be to establish new routines within a new environment – a 'fresh start', supported by multi-agency working. In addition to this behaviour, this young man was also touch sensitive and found it difficult to walk with anyone behind him.

Because of these factors there was a high possibility that he would become physically challenging towards anyone in close proximity.

Staff have worked with the young man to desensitise him regarding touch and his ability to be more flexible with routine and expectation. This has proved to be very successful. He now freely enters into the group culture within the college setting. He has been engaging in all activities set without challenging expectation, for example our greeting circle. He has been learning British Sign Language (BSL) to support his communication in this session. This interaction has been extremely successful considering how long it has been since he was in a group environment.

It was hoped that by adopting a multi-agency approach, we would develop joint strategies for working, and arrive at a model for future use, that could be shared with other providers.

The link between the college and the school means that transition programmes to support vulnerable young people for whom further education would have previously proved untenable can be developed.

## Implementation

There has been a wealth of meetings and information sharing between all parties involved. Members of the East and North Community Assessment Treatment Service Team spent 4 weeks supporting this young man alongside college staff to ensure a continuity of approach. His days were shorter to start with and these gradually increased as time progressed and he appeared more settled. This young man is now attending on a full time basis, 4 days a week, with support provided by the College. The member of staff who supports him is highly experienced and is training the rest of the team in best practise with regard to communication and behaviour management. Funding had proved a possible issue, but we have managed to arrive at a mutually agreeable package of funding, supported by the school.

The initial aim was to settle this young man into college; from this we could then establish effective working practice and behavioural guidelines. This has been achieved. He has progressed much further and far quicker than originally envisaged and is now working alongside his peers in all activities. A major personal achievement for him has been to get back into the swimming pool again – he achieved this last week for the first time! As the year has progressed he continues to increase his participation within all activities and now fully embraces the group culture. He is also accepting of working with a range of staff, therefore reducing his reliance on set individuals.

The young man attends the 'Focus' programme at Springfield is a unique provision in FE; it concentrates on the needs of the individual and addresses the basic skills for learners within the Autistic Spectrum Disorder. Focus has an excellent reputation for providing a safe and positive environment for our learners that helps to minimise challenging behaviours and has been developing over the last 14 years

The programme is underpinned in the fundamentals communication approaches of intensive interaction. Such as: -

- Learning to give brief attention to another person.
- To share attention with another person.
- Learning to extend those attentions, learning to concentrate on another person.
- Developing shared attention into 'activities'.
- Taking turns in exchanges of behaviour.
- To have fun, to play.
- Using and understanding eye contacts.
- Using and understanding of facial expressions.
- Using and understanding of non-verbal communication such as gesture and body language.
- Learning use and understanding of physical contacts.

- Leaning use and understanding of vocalisations, having your vocalisations become more varied and extensive, then gradually more precise and meaningful.

A variety of communication aids and practices such as sign language and are reflected in the programme and implemented with the supported by our speech and language therapists. Creating a culture of mutual respect, where the learners can develop their skills at a pace suitable for their individual need, in a flexible environment with highly trained staff

## Outcomes and impacts

We need to continue to the work in a holistic manner, with a multi-agency approach to ensure continuity and more importantly, never assume that we have addressed all the issues that this young man faces as he moves through the various transitions that life brings.

His needs will constantly shift and the team need to develop his coping strategies i.e. introducing a variety of staff to him in order that he doesn't develop a reliance on individuals and in order that this mirrors real life experiences, as he matures and grows in confidence. We need to support him to make choices that support his needs and aspirations and stretch and challenge him. I.e. to develop his ability to encounter new activities and to cope with and accept change, which is an inevitable part of daily life.

By achieving these goals, we aim to afford him greater social opportunities and the option to broaden his educational opportunities, possibly moving him onto a higher level programme if he feels that is something he wishes to do. He is now able to access community opportunities and has started to broaden his food options when on a community visit.

Therefore the intended outcome is to ensure the sustainability of his future beyond education, and indeed the future of other young people for whom this may currently not be seen as a possibility, by giving him the skills to manage his own behaviour and thereby underpinning the development of the wider social skills he needs to cope in the world.

This is seen as an extension of the Personalised approach to learning we already advocate, with the intention of leading to an even greater number of individuals staying within their community, than has already been achieved to date. A 50% increase in applications for the next academic year demonstrates a demand in this area of need and it is essential that we are prepared and flexible in our approach if we are to 'make a real difference'. A key issue is the need to have access to appropriate resources, in particular accommodation. Thought also needs to be given to the options mix and the acknowledgement, that for some, an educational programme is not the most appropriate option.

There was an additional outcome from this project and that was the development of a video, made with some of our students and narrated by a student with Autism. We recognised that there was a need to raise awareness amongst mainstream students and staff as to the needs of our students. A video was produced and has been rolled out across the whole campus and to wider agencies. The feedback has been amazing and it has served as an excellent student induction and staff development tool. A link to the video can be found below.

## What advice we would give to others

Clear communication is imperative if this model of working is to succeed i.e. regular meetings and sharing of information, especially regarding strategies and approaches. This will lead to a consistent approach both within an educational and home environment and any future placement. The consistency of approach needs to include the tools that give the learner and all those involved the skills to work towards a common goal i.e. effective communication strategies,

that include a wide range of options – pictures, symbols, sign language, key words – all presented within an accessible format; in this case a pictorial target sheet. This enables this young person to be aware of expectations, targets for the day and the ability to develop the self-reflection skills required to develop self-belief.

It should also be made clear to these young people, professionals and any future providers that there are other, more holistic means of addressing any issues, rather than dealing with them in isolation and whilst this wasn't the case with this young man, we have seen it used as an all too common solution to a problem by others.

Person centred approaches are the key to success. Identifying the real aim of the individual's programme is essential i.e. social and emotional development, before thinking in educational terms.

## Further information

The video referred to above can be found at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8czAR28hqGw>

Also at

<http://download.oaklands.ac.uk/catalogue/disability.mp4>

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**Provider name(s) :** Springfield, Oaklands College, Greenside School

**Sector coverage :** This case study is relevant to FE providers, both mainstream and specialist, Learning Difficulty Schools and multi-agency teams supporting young people who may present with additional challenges to the system.

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