



Inclusive Learning Environments - Online

Inclusive Learning Environments for 16 to 25 Year Olds

This article discusses key thoughts extracted from the 'Inclusive Learning Environments for 16 to 25 Year Olds' Roundtables which took place on Friday 18 December 2020 and Friday 22 January 2021.

Only when we understand the purpose of something do we begin to grasp the benefits it can bring to day-to-day life. The current pandemic has made us question the need and role for physical schools. Subsequently, what became apparent was the essential role that schools and learning play not only for students, but also for their families and communities. Lessons learnt during this period have emphasised the variability of needs and the importance of inclusive, specialised care within and outside of these settings. Focussing on these needs we can examine the existing infrastructure, and utilise what we have, to then create innovative new spaces and purposes within each setting; determining where funding should be invested, the integration of spaces and encouraging independence.

Transforming Traditional Learning and Vocational Training

We may need to re-examine and transform existing examinations, detaching from memory-based tests. It is possible that these may not be the most effective way of measuring education or potential. Discussion around this encourages a movement towards an education system which instead engages young people to apply their knowledge in practical settings. In doing so, this develops life skills which can then be utilised throughout all aspects of living, across all settings. Generating a clear objective of what educators should teach, and the experience young people should be provided with, assists in determining ways to tailor these approaches and environments sufficiently. Equally, providing young people with more independence through vocational training provides them with more control around what and how they learn; an empowering act for a young person. There is an expectation that young people should go into further education, and on the contrary, a stigma around vocational training, as if this is more appropriate for those who are less educated. Perhaps introducing these opportunities more often, and earlier, in the young person's education journey could reduce this stigma. It could also prepare young people through the development of skills, knowledge and confidence to enter further education later, if they wish to do so. Inclusivity could be unlocked through vocational training. Voluntary and external organisations additionally play a powerful role in supporting young people and providing inclusive settings where life skills can be established and refined, e.g. The Yard in Scotland. However, these organisations are often underfunded and not always integrated appropriately. At times, core services can be made invisible, compromising their sustainability.

A Digital Era

The gaming industry frequently receives negative views due to its engaging, or arguably addictive, characteristics. Though, it does equip users with life skills: communication, problem solving, creativity. More focus on its potential and integrating digital materials with learning could become, quite literally, game changing. Collaboration with the gaming industry could provide educators with an updated approach to promoting enjoyable, life-long learning. Virtual learning bypasses the current formulaic process of relying on teachers to learn. It encourages independence, responsibility and the ability to learn further afield examining international perspectives compared with systematic textbook learning. Digital learning has activated a major shift within education, making educators question what aspects of learning are outdated in the 21st century digital arena. Geographical locations and time zones no longer matter. Technology can be used on a global basis ranging from the transfer of knowledge to work experience and vocational training. However, these opportunities must be facilitated using a holistic approach, acknowledging many may have insufficient access to resources outside of a school setting. For others, technology may not suit individual needs; more specific support and tools may be needed. The UK Mental Health Foundation indicated that young people between 18 and 24 are three times more likely to feel lonely and anxious compared to before Covid-19. This begs the question: despite technology's convenience for learning and virtual 'connection', could this be partly responsible for these detrimental feelings of isolation? With virtual platforms available at our fingertips, perhaps a lack of physical connection could be contributing to why young people feel disconnected.

Lost Provision

With alternative provision largely stopped at age 16, this leaves the young person and their family under stress as they lose support, structure and consistency in their life journey. Consequently, this adds pressure to mental health services which provokes the question: how else can we support a young person's needs to prepare them for subsequent life transitions? Stronger relationships should be formed from the offset between stakeholders, local authorities and, importantly, headteachers to efficiently collaborate to direct where funding should be invested. These areas of expertise assist in identifying specific settings, services and relationships needed to tackle individual needs. Vocational training and higher education play a big role in providing inclusivity; giving young adults, with additional support needs, equal opportunities and learning experiences as well as a safe haven. These spaces further assist in refining social skills; an area which some groups of young people need extra assistance in. Overall, vocational training and higher education settings help give young people confidence to unlock their full potential and smoothly transition through life stages and employment.

Improving Current Infrastructure and Community Integration

There is a strong link between learning and the setting in which it takes place. Consulting with young people about what spaces are important to them is not only beneficial for their learning, but also for recreating and redesigning existing spaces. This process could assist in delivering education in an innovative way and may mean that spaces are used more cost effectively. Naturally, young people navigate to spaces where they feel comfortable; this ranges from campus steps to collaborating on park benches. International research in education settings indicates benefits through transforming traditional spaces into agile spaces. Agile spaces provide choice as to how and where learning happens. This refines decision making skills and allows young people to autonomously tailor spaces and learning to

suit their needs. Spaces may include nooks, reflection and collaboration areas, standing tables and bean bags, replicating living spaces in a comfortable and flexible learning context. Research further suggests that the option of choice promotes positive behavioural change. With blended learning possibly becoming the new 'normal', this could open up opportunities for community integration. Young people could learn outside of their homes and classrooms. They could use independent spaces in the local community, such as cafes or hubs. Similarly, the Scottish education system in recent years have introduced campus models which have become increasingly popular. They assist in effectively integrating mainstream schools with special schools and the wider community. Distinct spaces are dispersed with each area having an individual, specialised purpose. This essentially develops an education "village" promoting inclusivity, equality and attracts the local community. Schools are often the heart of a community offering respite, school meals, and nurturing social and physical environments while accommodating sensory considerations. Natural lighting and biophilia also elicit calming physiological effects, including attention restoration and focus and lowered heart rate and anxiety. If users feel valued by the environment they are in, this generates vast psychological benefits.

It's important to remember that it's not about the buildings themselves; it's about what goes on inside them.



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'Inclusive Outdoor Learning Spaces for All Ages' Roundtable

The 'Inclusive Outdoor Learning Spaces for All Ages' Roundtable is scheduled to take place on **Friday 5 March 2021, between 9:30 – 10:30am.**

Emphasis on the benefits of outdoor learning spaces tend to focus on pre-school or primary school populations. These outdoor settings aren't restricted to learning environments, but also local parks or woodland areas. Vast research suggests the positive impact that nature can have on health and well-being. Exploring these spaces in adolescent or young adult populations could be particularly enlightening, with mental health and well-being becoming prominent issues in today's society of young people.

If you would like to take part in this Roundtable please email caseyansell@stepconnect2.com for joining instructions.

All our **Inclusive Learning Environments Online Roundtables** are hosted on MS Teams and facilitate ideas and discussion around ways in which the existing education system can be adapted to progress the development of learners, with an emphasis on community and inclusivity. These events are diverse and open to all. Some previous roundtables have included contributors ranging from public sector figures, educationalists, architects, contractors, consultants and more.

For more information, please visit: www.inclusivelearningenvironments.com

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