



SERVING UP MEDIOCRITY

Young people with disability have little hope of transcending the ‘culture of mediocrity’ that prevails in the disability services sector says Dan Kearns. Part 1.

Ten years after he had left the special school where I taught, one of our former pupils returned with some great, and very unexpected, news. He had learned to read, he told the principal excitedly.

My initial reaction was surprise: who would have thought this young man would be interested in continuing his education. But I immediately felt ashamed for perpetuating a stereotype of people with learning difficulties, mental illness or other disabilities, as having limited skills and restricted potential.

Since then I have become aware of the ways in which I conveyed my low expectations to students with disabilities and their families. I’ve also come to realise how the same prejudices are evident in ‘dumbed down’ services in places providing education, vocational training and employment for young people with disabilities. It is hardly surprising that these young people become disadvantaged, discouraged, and demoralised and often cannot gain skills in the workplace when they are able to find jobs.

Knobbling them young

My first experience of the dumbing down process occurred thirty years ago when I helped teach my younger brother Brendan who is deaf-blind. Our family and his teachers were really keen to extend his vocabulary of signs and we taught him 200 – but then we realised that anyone else who worked with Brendan would only have time to learn about 50. At that point we stripped his vocabulary to reduce his frustrations – and deprived him of a more expressive existence.

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Cramping hopes, dreams

In the final years of schooling, students with a disability receive vocational guidance from school transition officers and disability employment services. Students who are ambitious, optimistic and adventurous pose a dilemma to counsellors who see their role as getting young people with disabilities to accept the reality of limited careers. The irony is however, that by protecting these school leavers from disappointment and advocating a conservative path, we are left with very few examples of people who have raised the bar and sought stellar careers.

According to statistics from UNESCO and OECD, Australian students with a disability, especially those with a learning disability or mental health disorder are marginalised in our national training system. The main cause seems to be generic training packages that do not fit many people with a disability. Added to that are inflexible assessment processes and course requirements that cannot meet the needs of atypical learners.

This is a heavy blow to many families with children who possess amazing skills and highly developed interests that has led them to imagine the next Bill Gates or Steve Irwin.

Marginalised at work

Employment services meet their targets by accepting placements from employers on their database, rather than entertaining any hopes and dreams their clients might cherish. Clients are also encouraged to take casual or part-time work in the area. Unfortunately, most opportunities for on-the-job training and careers with prospects of progressing are reserved for full-time or permanent staff, which means that casual staff miss out on ‘learning rich’ environments and training opportunities.

If the client is assessed against the Supported Wage System, productivity rather than competency is the important factor. The motivation to continue with vocational training is therefore not measured or rewarded.

This disenchanted journey through school to vocational training and employment does nothing to foster notions of ability and competency. What we end up with instead is a culture of mediocrity in the disability services sector.

This culture needs to be challenged and overturned. In part 2 in the next edition of Link I will provide some strategies to raise the aspirations and learning experiences of people with disability.

Dan Kearns

This article is an excerpt from a submission to the National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy 2008. Copies of the full report ‘Dumbed Down’: Experiences of disabled people in vocational training and employment in Australia can be requested from: kearnso@bigpond.net.au

A PARENT’S STORY

When our daughter started pre-school she had not been diagnosed although her disability was obvious. When her doctors finally decided that autism lay behind her lack of speech and unique behaviours the school guidance officer announced it was time for a meeting to ascertain her needs.

At this gathering a consensus was quickly reached that our child was a "level 6". This, we were told, would allow our daughter to receive the maximum amount of assistance. We continued to involve ourselves in the classroom, helping out where possible but we were unable to avoid becoming increasingly vocal about how little real help a "level 6" kids were given.

As our child prepared to enter year 1 we were invited to another meeting to discuss her future. At this "placement" meeting it was pointed out to us that a mainstream school was not really equipped to cater to children with high support needs and would we like to relocate to a special school as they had the resources and that was were level 6 students really belonged.

A list of the nearby special schools was produced and we were invited to inspect them and select the one that best suited our child's needs. At first glance they seemed ideal. Class sizes were small, teachers were warm and caring, what more could we want? Our previous experiences led us to look a little closer.

Would their academic program challenge our child? Academia program? Well no, life skills were given priority. Then could we go across to the mainstream school for some classes? Yes, but no teacher aide was available to help with that. What about the speech therapist? Could we see her to discuss our daughters' needs? No, the last one had retired and no replacement had been hired.

Disillusioned, we returned to our local school to deliver our decision. Because there was nowhere that offered more than a token attempt to meet the individual needs of a very individual girl we decided to stay where we were. This was not well received. Five years later we're still there. We're still looking for all those services that are said to exist for level 6 kids but we think our girl has found something better and more fun – friends.

Reproduced from Queensland Parents for People with Disabilities



DISMANTLING MEDIOCRITY

By Dan Kearns

Some seismic shifts have occurred around the world politically and socially in the last three or four decades, yet for many people with disabilities their prospects of obtaining training and employment that advances their dreams and aspirations are no better now than they were in 1981 when I first began working in this area.

As I explained in the last issue of Link, people with disabilities are taught early on by teachers and society not to be ambitious – that way leads to disappointment and frustration. And should anyone be determined enough to make it to adulthood with their dreams intact, they soon find the training and work opportunities available to them are well below average. The result is a sanctioned culture of mediocrity.

The situation can and must change and I believe the most likely way this will occur is by undermining the key prop of mediocrity – conformity. Throughout history, renewal has come from people considered unreasonable because they were no longer willing to conform.

Being “unreasonable”

The Irish writer George Bernard Shaw talked about being unreasonable and, according to Shaw, all progress relies on the Unreasonable Person. Reasonable people accept the current situation while the unreasonable person challenges the system and demands better. Situations and systems cannot progress without recognising that things can be improved and that requires refusing to accept mediocrity.

The value of the unreasonable person is appreciated in other cultures and also in today's business world. The abbots of Buddhist monasteries often insert a difficult person into the group to unsettle and challenge complacency. The Roman Catholic Church uses the Devil's Advocate to question dogma. Innovative companies constantly challenge traditions so changes (innovations) can emerge. Other companies deliberately hire non-conformists because they know that mediocrity thrives on conformity.

To avoid being dumbed down, be like Oliver Twist and ask for more. Raise your aspirations and raise your expectations of the training providers and employers that influence these aspirations. As such we are not being difficult – we are doing trainers, employers and people with disabilities a favour.

Reframing disability

Forty-five years ago a Frenchman called Jean Vanier invited two people with developmental disabilities to leave the institution where they had spent all their lives and share his house, L'Arche (The Ark). In a few years L'Arche became a small community where people with developmental disabilities, and those who assisted them, worked and lived together. There are now 130 L'Arche communities around the world. Its mission: "In a divided world, L'Arche wants to be a sign of hope. Its communities, founded on covenant relationships between people of differing intellectual

capacity, social origin, religion and culture, seek to be signs of unity, faithfulness and reconciliation."

L'Arche's values of hope and unity inspired me: rather than pleading my clients as worthy of charity to TAFE managers and employers, I presented disability as one variation of the human condition. I suggested that widening the recruitment pool would mean organisations had to be innovative in the way they adapted to difference. As well, trainers would need different and more dynamic teaching strategies rather than simply using overheads and worksheets.

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Generally 'reasonable adjustment' and 'unjustifiable hardship' dance around each other in a demonic waltz but I have seen some wonderfully creative results generated by the need to resolve these opposing principles. For example, literacy being tackled with a rich array of graphics, visual cues, short movies, team learning and mentoring; or employers and training institutions responding to mental health issues by devising alternatives to formal exams, and coming up with wellness programs that accommodate episodes of mental trauma or illness – something all employees experience.

Sometimes the most complex disability issues lead to the most creative outcomes: my deaf-blind brother Brendan has accessed the Melba Centre in Victoria for 36 years and he and other clients have certainly benefited from the innovations they developed for him.

Raise your equity antennae

All systems and services change and we need to be diligent to avoid slipping into mediocrity. We need to scrutinise courses closely for implied and actual inequities that result in students with disabilities getting less than their able bodied peers.

Subtle barriers can come in the way training is delivered, in course pre-requisites and in the steps between each level – we must ensure each step is properly supported.

“Learning rich” workplaces are also vital: “richness” may mean taking temporary higher duties or a secondment to a remote location.

It is a furphy that employees with a disability are never ambitious – if an employment agency won't support your ambitions, refuse to conform to their expectations and ask for professional development every time the opportunity arises. Aiming to become boss one day is not unreasonable is it? ☺