

Teen Dreams: Voices of Students With Intellectual Disabilities

Abstract

High school students with intellectual disabilities who are transitioning into adult life participated in discussions of their school experiences. Utilizing deductive thematic analysis through an emancipatory critical disability lens, students responded to an individualized semi structured interview protocol aimed at engaging them in a discussion focused on their perceptions and activities as high school students and adolescents. Responses were recorded to prompts initiated by the researchers. Reporting on the lived experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities requires researchers to acknowledge their limitations in interpreting data. As educational researchers, we strive to give voice to this often marginalized group within educational settings as well as larger society. This "giving of voice" can involve a great deal of subjective interpretation, particularly when voices of those with profound intellectual disabilities are being heard. Subverting these voices into what might be perceived as a "normalized" version to fit into the preconceived notions of researcher and reader is an inherent danger in any interpretative endeavour. In this paper, researchers made a conscious and sustained effort to listen to the voices of teenagers with intellectual disabilities without interference. Research themes that guided the construction, collection and analysis of data were influenced by a priori knowledge and experience of the researchers as well as the existing literature.

As perceptions of disability continue to evolve, the impetus for finding new ways to view the experiences of individuals with disabilities becomes paramount. What were historically considered fundamental tenants of disability theory have been opened up to scrutiny and debate (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Shakespeare & Watson 2001). Much of the discourse in disability research, and the resulting development of policy for students within educational and community based organizations, has been influenced heavily by sociological and anthropological theoretical constructs of how individuals with disabilities function within the social world (Klotz, 2004; Taylor, 2000). Whether the orientation is one that characterizes the lack of fit into society being the result of deficits on the part of an individual with an intellectual disability (Edgerton, 1976) or an orientation that focuses on the relationship between social constructs and disability (Bogdan & Taylor, 1982; Laichowitz, 1988) it is clear that the threads of these orientations towards disability still exist in educational practice (Slee & Allan, 2001).

In more current literature, criticisms have arisen that research related to individuals with intellectual disability,

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in particular those with profound intellectual disability, lacks meaningful interpretation and participation by individuals from within that group (Snelgrove, 2005; Stalker, 1998). Barton, (2005) highlights the need for recognition and understanding, through listening, to those important and knowledgeable voices, the voices of individuals who experience disability. Efforts on behalf of experts to interpret and quantify, often through qualitative means, the experiences of individuals with intellectual disability always necessitate the adoption of a framework from which to view the individual within context. While this is a worthy endeavour, the result of applying particular orientation to that which is unknown to us can often result in misinterpretation and misrepresentation. In essence we overlap our schema onto another's reality; inevitable in research but often overdone in disability research.

The fundamental question becomes, how do we, as researchers, step far enough away to allow voice to be heard, but yet stay close enough to support and assist in the dissemination of those voices (Stone & Priestly, 1996). Within the educational context, efforts to capture the voices and experiences of students with exceptionalities have provided much needed insight into the lives of individuals with disabilities (Bentley, 2008; Snelgrove, 2005). Despite these attempts, it is clear that most of the research on students with disabilities relies heavily on reports of those surrounding the student, rather than the students themselves (Malone & Gallagher, 2010; Nowicki, 2006; Praisner, 2003). For individuals with intellectual disabilities that seems particularly true. Perhaps it is our need to interpret or to fill in what we see as blanks, to lay our schema atop what we perceive as awkward silences or lack of functional vocabulary that leads us to doubt that the student voices alone are enough. Our eagerness to assist, while in its intent altruistic, can also be interpreted as a disregard for a form of communication that is different. We often strive within education to "normalize" (Wolfensberger, 1972) students with intellectual disabilities. The quest to make them more like us is still pervasive.

Within an ever growing movement towards inclusive practices, with school boards touting their percentages of students with exceptionalities in the regular class, students' with intellec-

tual disabilities are still segregated at staggeringly high rates; in some areas almost 50% of the student population with intellectual disabilities are still housed in self-contained classes (Bennett & Gallagher, 2012; Bentley, 2008). Within these settings, the goal is to teach life skills (often laundry and food preparation), somehow supporting the premise that experiences, within a diverse school community, navigating the lunchroom, roaming the halls, breaking into and forming cliques, are not life skills worth having and not life as a teenagers experience them.

The sociological and anthropological models that have historically driven educational practices have rooted within them a *differing* of students with intellectual disabilities. Ideological constructs of inclusion, have as a natural counterpoint othering. In essence, as noted by Baglieri, Bejoian, Broderick, Connor, & Valle (2011), the distinction between normal and abnormal remains the foundational tenant of exclusive practice. As educators we too often adopt this discourse of difference and our adherence to those models, often unquestioned after decades of use, has become a familiar habit that need to be re-examined and disregarded.

Listening is the place to start. Listening to the voices of individuals with intellectual disabilities as they experience school can provide a powerful picture of the teenager experience. The dialogue presented in this work is, to the best of our ability, unedited. It is classified into questions and responses but not interpreted, though the authors did endeavour to sort dialogue into themes. It is, we hope, a window into the thoughts, desires, and perceptions of teenagers with intellectual disabilities within inclusive high schools as they look ahead to transitioning into adult life.

Materials and Methods

Methodology

The data and findings presented in this paper are part of a larger research project which examined the stakeholder perspectives of the transitions of young adults with intellectual disabilities into the workplace. Researchers were approached by school board personnel to partner in a collaboratively developed and

administered project to examine the impact of their inclusion model. This model of inclusive practice, based on a foundational tenant of the board "Each Belongs," has been in existence for a number of decades and is characterized by full inclusive practice. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from three high schools that were recommended by the board as being exemplars of inclusion and transition. The research team was given full access to the students, staff, parents and community employers through the cooperation of the Coordinator of Student Transition. Researchers collected survey and interview data over several months during the spring term of the school year. For the purpose of this paper, the voices of the students with intellectual disabilities were used as the primary data source. Interview questions focused on factors that resulted in the bridge for these young adults into social relationships, independent work, school life and community inclusion. Survey data gathered in the larger project is reported elsewhere (see Bennett & Gallagher, 2013). Ethics review for this research study was obtained through the Brock University Ethics Review Board.

Participants

Participants within this mid-sized, urban Ontario school board included high school students (ages 16-21) with intellectual disabilities (n=21). These students ranged in terms of nature of intellectual disability (mild to profound) and some were nonverbal and nonambulatory. Some of the students with intellectual disabilities were completing their first work term as part of the school's transition program; others had several previous work placement experiences. The students with intellectual disabilities were sampled from three high schools. The schools were selected by the Superintendent and Administrator of Special Education. The students included all of those that were identified as having an intellectual disability and attended one of these three high schools.

Data Collection

Students were interviewed over a period of 3 months. Interviews were conducted with individual students by two members of the research team. One team member asked the

questions while the other was assigned to keep field notes of physical gestures, facial expressions and other indicators that supported a more robust representation of the students' response. Some of the students with intellectual disabilities required assistance interpreting the questions and/or responding to the questions. The research assistants and, in some cases, the students' educational assistants, provided support for this process while efforts were made to minimize the level of interference. A majority of participants were interviewed once, with a few instances of secondary interviews for information clarification. On average interviews lasted from one to one and a half hours. The questions asked of the students focused on five areas: school life; friends; home, family & community participation; work and finally future dreams. Participants were all assigned a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Interviews were digitally audio recorded and later transcribed. Both members of the original data collection team shared the transcription of the interviews and then shared and reviewed the materials. Changes were made based on reflection and field notes where appropriate, in particular where the recording was unclear and physical gestures of facial expressions were part of the response.

Data Analysis

Using a framework of critical disability theory (Rioux & Valentine, 2006), data analysis incorporated deductive thematic methodology to categorize stories into the pre-established themes used to generate the interview questions. Deductive themes were identified pre-transcript analysis based on the aims and objectives of the interview questions developed from the researcher's a priori reasoning from personal experience in the field and vigorous review of the literature (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000). The five themes identified by the interview questions included school life; friends; home, family & community participation; work, and future dreams. Transcripts were examined closely, and re-read by each member of the research team in order to elicit all comments that directly related to each of these five themes. Comments were sorted manually into the corresponding themes including additional prompts and gestures that may have influenced the response in an attempt to honour the auth-

enticity of each participant's answers. Themes were utilized in order to identify and report the patterns found in the data and for the purpose of presenting the comments of the individuals in an authentic and unaltered way (Braun & Clarke, 2006). What follows is an overall analysis of each theme with specific examples from the transcripts.

Results

Theme One: School Life

All of the 21 participants responded positively when asked about their experiences at school. They were unanimous in their communication to us that they liked school. In this inclusive setting, students were given access to the entire curriculum and decisions were made collaboratively with regard to course and activity preferences, as well as the compatibility of their preferences to their future goals. This same type of consideration and counselling, with regard to course selection would be given to any high school student. Courses that were preferred by the students were ones in which they felt actively involved such as physical education, dance, computers, music and visual arts. Only two students stated math was a favourite and three students cited English as a favourite course, noting that they enjoyed silent reading time or the discussions that they had. Three students stated gym was a class that they did not like, rationalizing it because it is tiring and they didn't like rushing to change and get to other classes. Many participants answered "yes" with no expansion or explanation, a typical response from a teenager when being asked about their school day. However some expressed reasoning behind the answer.

The following is a sampling of those student responses.

Do you like school?

Jessie: Yes and no. It matters what I said it matters what I do that day. I have stuff to do in the class that it's fun. If I don't then it's pretty boring. I like auto and construction because I'm good at hands-on and both classes involve you, like using tools and stuff in you have to do it by yourself

and hands-on, so it's easier for me to understand the concept to do it.

Robert: Yes I do, I like school. I think my favourite class is art, and computers, I have no idea why.

I: Do you like gym class?

Carol: [Smiled]

Kyle: Ah yeah and no - yeah because I want to get a good future and get a good job, and do what I want to, but no because like I find there is a lot of pressure to. Do you know what I mean? I like English, and ah, well obviously phys ed. too, that's fun and it like gets my energy levels down a bit after you know what I mean? English, like I can just explain stuff, I think that's like, cause like my work ethic at school is horrible, so like when I ah... like I can explain myself out of English problems, because there's not, there's not just one answer and so I can explain my way out of it, and like phys ed. is physical, hands on, so maybe that's why I like it.

I: All right, so do you like school?

Casey: I like school, I like this school, yes (thumbs up).

I: So that's a thumbs up, all right. What is your favourite class?

Casey: Lunch, yeah

I: Lunch? Lunch is not a class.

Casey: It doesn't matter.

I: What is your favourite class?

Jason: Dance

I: Why do you like that class?

R: I love to dance.

EA: He's in the Snow White play and he's dancing, we made him "dancey," he dances all the time.

(The school's theatrical production for that year was modified specifically to include Jason.)

I: What are your favourite classes?

Peyton: Um, I like music, baking, computers, English.

I: Do you like them all?

Peyton: Yes

I: Is there one or two you like the most? What class is that?

Peyton: Music

I: Music? And why do you like that class the most?

Peyton: Because I play the maracas.

What class do you not like?

Kyle: Um, I have to say math, but I feel like I would enjoy it if I had the right teacher. Maybe

Rich: Religion, because it is boring

Sydney: Gym, because it is tiring

Sameet: Umm...Gym

I: Gym, you don't like gym class?

Sameet: No because running around does crazy things to my head.

Gavin: Mostly drama

I: Drama? Why don't you like drama?

Gavin: I hate these teachers, but Mrs. S is good, but that other one gets on my nerves.

Dale: Um, science

I: And why do you not like science?

Dale: Um, when we are doing experiments they, they explode all over me [laughing].

How does your EA/teacher help you?

Sam: By myself (indicating that he seems himself as working independently)

EA: Ok, and he helps you with your projects

Sam: And party

EA: Party? He helps you party?

Sam: Yeah (it was clear from facial expression and tone that the students was teasing). I love school.

Jessie: Ah...She helps me scribe for my tests, so like I tell her the answer and she writes it out, and she'll help me get caught up on my notes when I fall behind.

Allison: Ah...She helps me if I get stuck, yes. They help me understand what I'm doing, ah...I don't know; let's see I'm not sure.

Kyle: Um, well... the best teacher I've had was Mr. B--. Who's a religion teacher and he really cared about people really having a good future and

looked at everyone the same way, type deal, like, cause some of us weren't as smart as some, he wouldn't judge them and I find a lot of my teachers, well no, just a couple, I'm not going to point them out, but like, they just bring you down, like point you down type deal, and if you are not as good as someone else, and they don't look at you the same way, and they try to make it hard on you almost I feel. And I know, it's like, oh, they are just trying to help you, but at the same time it's just kinda... I don't know...

Jessie: Because they help, they help me they help me show the technique of how to do the things, they show me how to use the tools in the class so I don't go walk over to accidentally flip the switch that blows the device up. Ah, he, if I have problems with, in the class if I don't understand how a part works he helps me explain what the part does and tells me a trick how to get the piece together.

Kyle: I think it would be like... instead of... well it depends on what teachers. Like some teachers like don't... like they give too much work, and they smother kids with work, and I'd like... some people get us and some don't. But like for someone like me, I don't have the attention span to listen to it all, but like if you gave me short lessons, I could get the work done better so I'd like them to help me, and also being a bit more understanding, but not letting me off the hook, like at the same time.

As is typical with many high schools students, when they are not engaged, they find school "boring." These students especially appreciated hands-on activities and opportunity to produce something tangible. When asked about their teachers, the attitudes of certain teachers influenced the students' judgment of a course. In particular, a teacher that respects them and doesn't judge them based on their abilities is one that is preferred. As well, a teacher who understands how they learn and is able to differentiate is highly regarded.

Theme Two: Friends

Friends were defined and referenced by the participants as those peers that are kind and help out or those peers that acknowledge the students at school. Additionally, good friends were distinguished as those peers that participants spent more time with hanging out, playing video games, attending activities together or sharing common interests.

Do you have a best friend? What makes him a good friend?

Sam: Yes, because he's sleeping over tomorrow

I: Oh, you get a sleepover tomorrow?

Sam: Yeah

EA: What makes a good friend? Why is he a good friend?

Sam: Because I love him

Dale: My friend, I actually have two of them. They both like to laugh at silly stuff. They're always there, they're always there for me, whenever I'm sad or down they're always there for me

I: So they help you out, the kids

Eli: No, (laughs)

Kyle: yes. J--G--. he's my neighbour and we've been best friends for a couple of years.

I: Awesome. Why is he your friend?

Kyle: Well, we just I don't know. We just relate good. And we have the same interests and it's not just doing a whole lot of nothing. Kind of like we are outdoors guys, and like we never get mad at each other and when we do it's just like, it's between us and we don't make a big deal of it.

I: What makes a good friend?

Rich: When they stick up for you

I: Is that what your friend does for you?

Rich: Yes

Allison: Her name is K--. I've known her for, I've known her all my life, I've known her since kindergarten. We've had a few ups and downs but everyone does right? And um, what else? We go to each other's houses a lot, and yeah.

I: What makes her a good friend?

Allison: She's kind, she's funny, she's friendly. She listens to me sometimes [laughs]. yeah

Casey: Well, two

I: Two?

Casey: One is you

I: Oh okay! And who is the other one?

Casey: You don't know them.

I2: That's okay, we don't need to. Can you tell me about them?

Casey: He's awesome and he's a hottie.

[laughing]

I: Do you like best buddies?

Carol: Groans

I: Yeah you like it, okay.

Sameet: Um... I guess... I say L---K---

I: And why do you like her?

Sameet: Because she looks pretty.

I: Oh she's pretty? Okay.

Sameet: And she's kind to me.

I: do you have a best friend?

Jessie: um... No.

I: No?

Jessie: I don't like that stuff. I don't pick a best friend because then they backstab you and it's like oh God, so I don't pick best friends, they're all friends.

I: Well what makes a good friend?

Jessie: ah... Being honest, not being rude, that's what I got.

Students with intellectual disabilities did seem to discern between those friends that were casual and those friends that they regarded as deeply connected to. Characteristics such as being trustworthy and having integrity seemed to be foundational in the participants defining of what makes a good friend. Shared interests and spending time together were clearly important. The answers that were given by the students interviewed seem typical to what would be expected from any teen.

Theme Three: Home and Family and Community Participation

Life at home for these high school students was marked by their close relationships with their family members, particularly parents. Activities were characteristic of those that teenagers enjoy such as watching television, going movies and going out to eat. All of the participants indicated that they had some responsibilities at home and they expressed distaste for doing chores.

Do you have to do chores?

Casey: Not really.

I: No? Why not?

Casey: Don't feel like it

I: Your mom doesn't ask you to do the dishes?

Casey: That's my brother's job, not mine

I: Oh, I see, so you do nothing at home?

Casey: I'm a princess, I do nothing

Maggie: Make my own lunch

John: I have to do dishes

Taylor: I help my mom sometimes; sometimes I make my bed and help with meals and help my mom around the house with cleaning.

Drew: Yes, I clean the garage, the car wash, and the garage.

Jessie: Ah... I do recycling and garbage, I do dishes the odd time I have to help clean some of the pets.

Allison: Cleaning my room, cooking... I love to cook, except when cooking with oil.

Now, what are your favourite things to do when you are hanging out with your family, so when you are hanging out with your parents? What are the things that you like to do best?

Robert: I think it's Christmas.

I: Just Christmas? So like opening presents and having everyone together?

Robert: Yes, having everybody all together, part of my family.

Rich: Talk to them

I: What else?

Rich: Hang out with them.

I: Do you hang out what do you do when you hang out, do you play a game or you watch TV?

Rich: Watch TV

I: What do you watch?

Rich: Discovery channel

Jessie: The thing we mostly do with my family is watch a ball game or watch a movie.

I: Do you get to pick the activity that you like to do

Jessie: I have a brother so we take turns, like it will be his turn, my turn, his turn, my turn.

Gavin: Pick restaurants

I: What's your favourite restaurant?

Gavin: McDonald's

Kyle: Um with my family... with my dad, well we are sports guys, we like watching, I like the UFC like that's my thing with my dad, mom doesn't really care for it, but ah... and my mom, I've noticed, we just don't really relate a lot, like she kinda does her own thing, and she doesn't really have time much to like hang out with me and stuff... so...

Sameet: Exercise and stay healthy

Dale: Mostly watch a movie or have a friend over. We'll have a friend come over and she'll have dinner with us and then watch a movie together.

Do you do any activities, do you belong to any clubs?

Jeff: Scouts

Sydney: The band

Jessie: I play a hobby outside of school, it's called Warhammer, it's like you build small army men and you paint them and build them and play a game.

I: Do you swim?

Casey: I'm faster than you.

Kyle: I've done martial arts, for a couple of years, and, I've taken breaks off of it, but I've always had a passion, so I always go back once in a while. That's about it.

The activities that students do with their families are quite typical. Chores are manageable and well-defined (not necessarily embraced) and family leisure time is casual and enjoyable. Not all of the students with intellectual disabilities mentioned that they had community activities. For those that did mention them, all of the activities were social and involved interactions with others. Watching sports, video gaming and eating pizza, being part of a scouts group were cited as things to do outside of school hours.

Theme Four: Work

For those involved in work placements they discussed some of the responsibilities of their jobs as well as their feelings about their engagement in the work environment.

Sameet: Stack chocolate bars

I: Oh, you stack chocolate bars

Sameet: Yes

I: Oh okay. What do you do at [name of the fitness club]?

Sameet: Me? Cleaning, I find dust and office clerk

I: Office clerk, good job. And what do you do at [restaurant]?

Sameet: Me? I bus food

I: Okay. Is your job easy?

Sameet: Yes

Jessie: Ah... The job that I had was I helped, after school I helped coach basketball teams. What I liked was because I actually got the chance to help younger kids learn the basics of basketball and was able to teach them some skills

I: What did you find easy about the job?

Jessie: the explaining everything because I played basketball all the time so I already knew all the skills so it was easy to go you go this that that, it was easy to show the technique

I: what did you find hard about the job?

Jessie: Trying to get them to pay attention [laughing]. When you work with grades 4 to 6's they really don't want to pay attention [laughing].

Sydney: I do data entry and returns.

I: Where do you work?

Sydney: a video store at a health science center.

I2: Oh gosh you have three jobs? Wow

I: What do you like about your job? Do you like data entry?

Sydney: Data entry, yes.

I: Who is your employer? That would be a local store?

I2: Yes

I: Tell me about the person you work with

John: I work with... a... My job coach.

I: How do they help you? How does he help you?

John: She helping me, she's... I come in the back room, and she helps me with (figuring out where to put things) button, show what to, (unclear),

I: Could they do more to help you, or are they doing enough?

John: They help me enough.

I: Tell me about the person who helps you the most at work?

Allison: At work? Well that would have to be my supervisor, J--.

I: And what does she help you with?

Allison: She helps me if I have a hard time with the residents. She helps me because some residents, they don't talk and I don't know sign language so I don't understand what they say.

I: What do you do at your job?

Allison: I help somebody; I transport the residents to mass, on Wednesdays I help somebody with a tea, sometimes I help [unclear] with the program, yeah something like that.

I: What do you like about your job?

Allison: Oh well everybody's really, really nice. Trust me if somebody was not nice I would not want to work there.

I: Can you tell me about your job?

Taylor: well, I have two different jobs... one is on Tuesdays and Thursdays, (unclear) and one of them I put movies away,

I: Where is that, at a video store?

Taylor: Yeah, I work one day there

I: And where else do you work? You told me?

Taylor: Another night on Thursdays, I work in an office, I work at [a charity foundation].

I: Oh, very cool. What do you do there?

Taylor: I filed papers, I put them in the file and then put them away and I help out with anything else I asked them

I: Awesome, good. What do you like about your job? Or, your jobs?

Taylor: I like one of them. One of them is my favourite

I: What one do you like the best?

Taylor: The [charity foundation], they've got nice people, they know me

I: Okay

Taylor: I'd like to work there

I: Good job. And what did you find easy to do it your job?

Taylor: Well the easiest is [the charity foundation], when working with the papers and that's all they need me to do, it's not hard putting paper and files

I: And what do you find hard to do?

Taylor: Um, nothing really, there's nothing really hard there, it's so easy for me to learn

Dale: Um, well as soon as I walk into the c... As soon as I walked in I wash my hands and then I get a sticker and then I go to this, one of the classrooms that I help out with and as soon as I walk in the student's, they'll recognize me right away and they'll run up to me and give me a hug. And that is basically, I don't do anything else.

I: So do you help them with their work or... Or do you?

Dale: Yes

I: What do you like about your job?

Dale: I get to see some people from my school that go to the, from, I get his season people here that go to that, that help out at that school

I: Okay. What do you find easy to doing your job?

Dale: Helping kids with their opening up their snacks

I: What do you find hard to do at your job?

Dale: Cleaning the table, because sometimes I forget to clean off the table

I: Do you have a job coach?

Gavin: Yeah I'm get, I'm getting rid of her. I'll tell you, I don't really need her, because I can do it my own self.

I2: Very good

Gavin: I've got it all in my head

I2: Oh that's perfect, so you don't really need a job coach anymore

Gavin: No

I2: What do you do at your job?

Gavin: Um, I sit there, at noon it's [name of work] I go there twice a week, and I just do my job and

then sometimes I have 2, and sometimes I go visit my grandma

I2: Oh, very nice. Now at your job what do you do?

Gavin: Help the residents

EA: Where do you work?

Drew: The office

I: In an office?

EA: Yes, at [town name], in the office

I: Oh, cool, so what do you do at work?

EA: What do you do there? Do you file, do you file the letters?

Drew: Yes

EA: Do you bring them to the people's rooms?

Drew: Yes

Experiences at work were described, for the most part, as interesting and enjoyable. Often, but not always, the participation of a job coach was considered positive. In general, these participants liked or disliked their workplace environments for the same reasons many individuals do, nice people, feeling needed and understanding the requirements.

Theme Five: Future Dreams

Dreams for the future for many of the participants included post-secondary education, gaining paid employment, having meaningful and intimate relationships and living independently. Approximately half of the participants had work experience placements. In some of these cases, they did reference these jobs as part of their future goals. Aspirations to be famous from careers in entertainment such as singing and acting were also mentioned as dreams for the future. These were supported by confident statements of their talents in these areas. Comments about marriage drew mixed reactions. Some regarded it as something not to be taken lightly while others had idealistic notions of a future partner.

What do you want to do when you leave school?

Kyle: I really want to go to university. Just like, I, I'm not the brightest kid, but that's my goal. Get into university, and have a good job. Cause don't know what I want to do but I know if I go to uni-

versity it will probably help me figure out what I want to do, and it might even tell me university is not for me, so I don't know, but that's probably ...

John: I would like to do ... um, I to stay home, I would like to go to college.

Robert: Maybe university, I have no idea, I think I'll stay home. My sister comes back on holidays

Drew: I'm going to buy a motorcycle

EA: You just want to drive your motorcycle?

Drew: Yeah, you can ride too, an extra helmet, you can put it on.

Where do you want to work?

Jason: Future shop

Dale: Well when my mom was little she always wanted to be, she's really good at singing and movies so I want to follow in her footsteps. I would like to focus on singing.

Jessie: Um ... Become an auto mechanic.

Maggie: I haven't thought about it.

Casey: I'll be on TV and [in] Hollywood.

Robert: Hmmm ... I could be a weatherman

I: A weather man! Cool! That's a lot of schooling though, are you ready for that?

Robert: Yeah

I: Yeah well I think you can do it.

Robert: Yes I will

Do you want to live on your own?

I: Do you want to live on your own

Maggie: (Smiling)

Drew: Yes

Robert: Yes

How about get married?

Jessie: I don't know about that one, it's not, haven't thought about that yet. I'll worry about that when the time comes

Maggie: I'm too young.

Sydney: A couple of years later

Peyton: Haven't really thought about it?

Sameet: Nope, I'm too young.

As with many students in their high school years the participants in this research were unsure of their plans for the future. Some had plans that were based on current experiences and others had dreams of a far distant future. Captured in the interviews were aspirational statements based on hope and cumulative life experiences. Given the inclusive nature of their school experiences it is not unrealistic to suppose that these types of discussions are part of a more general one participated in by most students within this age range.

Discussion

While in general the characterization of students with special needs has seen improvement in terms of facilitating and supporting groups with disabilities to speak out, conduct research as partners and inform policy with regard to their disability, in the area of individuals with intellectual disabilities much work still needs to be done. Calls for inclusion resound within school systems across the world but still, as overall statistics for inclusive education increase, students with intellectual disabilities are not considered equal. In the province of Ontario, while more than 79% of students with special needs are included in the regular classroom (2012/2013) (Bennett, Dworet & Weber 2013) for all of part of the day, 80% of students with intellectual disabilities are still in self-contained classroom settings all or part of the day. This statistic has not changed over the past number of years.

What is it about this population of students that seemingly makes it so difficult to include them into regular schooling? Some would purport that students with intellectual disabilities need to be protected and provided with specialized programming in small class size settings (Zarghami & Schnellert 2004). Others would discuss the difficulty that students with intellectual disabilities have interacting with regular class peers or the larger school environment (Thompson, Whitney, & Smith 1994). We would contend that the most persistent and pernicious barrier to successful inclusion for students with intellectual disabilities is attitude. (Abbott & McConkey, 2006; de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert 2011) Not the attitude of students with intellectual disabilities but the attitudes of those who feel entitled to make decisions for them. As noted by Taylor (2000) the acknowledgment of disability is not a declaration of master status. Indeed

identity of an individual is, for all of us an interaction between how we perceive the world and indeed how the world perceives us. Similar to Goffman's (1959) premise we are actors and it is our audience that often forces us into our roles as they define them, students with intellectual disabilities are at time a victim of perception.

This work provides a glimpse of students with intellectual disabilities in a completely inclusive high school setting. These students are teenagers, who like many teenagers are struggling for what Erikson (1968) would describe as self-identity. Establishing who they are in relation to their changing role and status; being able to develop by participating in new experiences; and forming different relationships that lead to adulthood are all essential component of adolescent development. (Kupersmidt & Dodge, 2004; Santrock, J., Woloshyn, V., Gallagher, T., Di Petta, T., & Marini, Z. (2010)). The teenagers in this study were provided with an opportunity to talk about how they perceive school, home, friends, employment and their future. Their audience is one that has for decades has adhered to a philosophy that all students are full and included members of the school community. For some participants, those interactions were rich with verbal discussions, while other participants were more comfortable with a yes or no. Students who were nonverbal represented a small group but participated willingly in the discussions. A nod, a smile and any type of vocalization was considered their response; as valid and as meaningful as those who responded in more familiar ways. We have attempted to use their words as authentically as possible. What their words show are reflective of their experiences, best friends, caring teachers, loving families and legitimate hopes for success and love in their adult life; not inherently different from what we would perceive to be any teenagers' hopes and aspirations. Students with intellectual disabilities are not different from their peers, we just make them so.

Key Messages From This Article

People with disabilities. Your voice is important, especially when it comes to your own future. You have important things to say about your experiences and about what you want to do with your life as you transition from high school. Speak up and make sure your desires and dreams are heard by those around you who can help you to accomplish your goals.

Professionals. The experiences and opinions of young people with intellectual disabilities are fundamental when ensuring their successful transition from secondary school. Consider their ideas, goals and dreams and recognize them as valid and important in preparing students for workplace entry or post-secondary studies.

Policymakers. Policies for the transition of students with intellectual disabilities from high school must include student voice. With necessary supports, they are able to clearly articulate their experiences and future goals. In order for transitions to be successful, policies must reflect the voices of the students themselves.

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