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Positive risk taking for and by people with learning difficulties: exploring the value of extending a social model of risk to education

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Background

People with learning difficulties are generally regarded as being an 'at risk' group and previous research has highlighted the very real risks to them in terms of poor treatment by others, lack of available opportunities, poor physical and mental health and poor social well-being (Mitchell, 2009; McConkey & Williams 2009). With the numbers of people with learning difficulties rising as growing numbers of children and young people with complex disabilities survive into adulthood (DOH 2005), services that support them face increasing challenges and these challenges will be influenced to a large extent by perceptions of risk. Whilst the 'at risk' discourse can be helpful in terms of highlighting the need for action and making the case for different kinds of responses to the needs of people with learning difficulties and others, it can be problematic in that the implied vulnerability of people with learning difficulties as 'at risk' can lead to a 'protection' discourse where people with learning difficulties are considered in need of being protected from harm, which easily leads to acts of over-protection and denial of potentially valuable opportunities. As Booth and Booth (1998: 206) note, the 'at risk label' itself becomes a 'risk factor' for limited life chances, which result from a proliferation of risk averse policies and actions in response to identified risks that can be more perceived than real.

Positive risk taking (PRT) is gradually being recognised as an alternative approach or culture in services for people with learning difficulties, where PRT is generally understood as enabling people with learning difficulties to make choices about all aspects of their lives, which may involve an element of risk, but if managed, should not result in harm (Manthorpe et al 1997; Alesewski & Alesewski 2002). This recognition is set within a national policy context addressing three particular concerns. i) the need for those who work with people who have a learning difficulty to think more positively about their abilities or capacities (The Mental Capacity Act, HMSO 2005); ii) the need for PRT to be a part of everyday life (Valuing People Now, Department of Health 2007); and iii) the need to get the balance right between protecting vulnerable people and supporting them to take risks, when it is their choice to do so ('Independence, Well-being and Choice', Department of Health 2005).

Research Questions

Despite the recognition at a policy level for the need for PRT when working with people who have learning difficulties, there is currently no clear or detailed understanding of how principles and policy statements can be turned into action, particularly in an educational context. In this paper we will argue that there is a need to investigate PRT for people with learning difficulties in the context of education compared to other contexts, to explore the perceptions of a range of stakeholders to PRT for people with learning difficulties and complex needs, and to understand how PRT is enacted as a dynamic process in context. There are three important overarching research questions, which we suggest should be addressed by future research:

1) What are the characteristics and key features of PRT for people with learning difficulties in education settings and how do these compare to those in informal education, health/social care and home/personal managed support settings?

2) How do stakeholder perceptions of risk for people with learning difficulties compare to the perceptions of risk for people with learning difficulties and what are the implications of any differences in perception for the development of PRT strategies?

3) What are the characteristics and key features of the "shared risk taking" practices of people with learning difficulties and complex needs and those tasked with supporting them and what influences this practice?

Methods

The rationale for these proposed research questions are linked to three key observations, drawn from analysis of existing literature:

1. The discourse of positive risk taking and learning difficulties is rarely applied to educational settings: There is currently little research or practice discourse around PRT in education. What little there is, focuses on three key themes: i) the special school as a safe or risk-aversive environment (Connor 1997; Bjarnasson 2005); ii) students at risk of academic failure (Allinder et al. 2002; Taggart et al 2006; Feiler & Logan 2007); and iii) the risk of experiencing reduced educational opportunities (Dowdy 1996; Leigh et al. 1995; Field 1996). Influential commentators have, however, linked risk taking to the development of more inclusive practices in schools. Ainscow (1999:71) argues that risk taking is "essential to the creation of more inclusive forms of pedagogy"; while Slee (2007:163) argues that pressures on school performativity makes schools "become more risk averse, more selective, more exclusive", which can result in denied access for students with learning difficulties.

2. The perceptions of risk held by different stakeholders is rarely explored in relation to educational contexts: Research indicates that parents, people with learning difficulties and professionals have very different perceptions of, and attitudes to, risk (Heyman & Huckle 1993; Clark et al. 2005). This suggests that a key to the success of PRT approaches with people with learning difficulties is "shared risk taking" where professionals, carers, parents and people with learning difficulties work together to agree plans and actions (McConkey & Smyth 2002). However, none of this work has focused on perceptions of risk within educational contexts.

3. Little is known about the dynamics between people with learning difficulties and those tasked with supporting them in and through PRT practices: Despite the growing recognition at a policy and service level for the need for PRT, little attention has been paid to how best to support individual practitioners to develop PRT practices. We have no in-depth descriptions or scoping of what PRT looks like in practice. Proposals for "shared risk taking" suggest that understanding the dynamic between all parties involved in risk taking would be illuminative. By exploring these dynamics, we can start to understand exactly how the good relationships that are advocated by researchers such as Collins, Harkin & Nind (2002:46) help to "provide a secure base from which individuals can take risks and learn."

Frame

In arguing for new research that focuses on learning difficulties and positive risk taking in educational contexts, we also argue that a new analytical framework is needed that seeks to extend social models and theories of risk. Sociological theories often focus on risk as a social construction and on the extent to which in a "risk society", risk perceptions and discourse challenge our assumptions about how predictable or controllable our social worlds are (Hier 2003; Beck 1992). Such theories tend to overemphasise the negative conceptions of risk and do little to help us understand the embedded facilitators and barriers to PRT.

Drawing on the outcomes of an ESRC funded seminar (Seale & Nind 2009) we propose an analytical framework that incorporates concepts of creativity and resilience and has the potential to help us understand the extent to which the denial of positive risk opportunities might be disabling and how educational institutions and educators, enact PRT.

PRT involves developing strategies so that the potential risks of accessing a learning activity or resource are balanced against the potential benefits. This might require an element of creativity in terms of how risks, problems, possibilities and opportunities are conceptualised or framed. The concept of possibility thinking (Cremin et al. 2006; Burnard et al. 2006) has particular explanatory potential. Building on the idea that possibility thinking involves moving into original and creative

spaces and therefore taking risks, we conceptualise PRT as being an exploratory adventure that involves experimentation and pushing boundaries.

Taking risks can take us outside our comfort zone and perhaps even be stressful. How people respond to this stress might influence their ability to maintain and develop long term successful PRT practices. This might be recognised as resilience in the sense of adapting, despite adversity or stress (Jackson 2002). Goodley (2005), views resilience as less of a personal characteristic and more of a political response to disabling and disempowering circumstances. Goodley's notion of resilience is attractive because it suggests that teachers and schools may develop a resilience that enables them to take positive risks, not because new government policy requires them to, but because they see, and wish to address, the injustice and inequality inherent in educational provision. Resilience is likely to be required of people and services in order for them to both support the PRT of people with learning difficulties and to take positive risks in their own educative practices.

Research findings

Using the concepts of creativity and resilience to frame an analysis of research into positive risk taking in education settings will enhance and extend our practical understanding of how PRT is enacted for and by people with learning difficulties as well as the complexities of PRT as a dynamic, embedded process.