

Centres for People with Intellectual Disabilities:

Attendees' perceptions of benefit.

Running Title: Benefits of Centres for People with ID

Keywords: Intellectual Disability – Community – Learning Centre

Abstract

Introduction

Day and community learning centres aim to provide intellectually disabled (ID) people with social support, life skills and greater control over their lives. However, there is little research exploring the benefits of attendance from the perspective of attendees and whether these goals are met.

Materials and Methods

Unstructured interviews were held with 4 female and 3 male participants with a mild level of disability, from an East Midlands Mencap facility. Interviews were transcribed and analysed through the Grounded Theory approach.

Results

Themes of social support, life skills, control and self-image emerged from the transcripts. This brief report focuses on issues of self-image and internal control of behaviour and emotion, as these constructs have received less attention within existing literature.

Conclusions

Learning centres provide important psychological benefits for people with learning difficulties. These are often less accessible to evaluation, but are nonetheless key outcomes from the perspective of attendees.

Introduction

In Britain, an estimated 39% of people with intellectual disabilities (ID) attend day and community learning centres (Emerson *et al.*, 2005). These centres provide opportunities for their attendees to participate in activities, meet new people, and learn life skills, and in doing so, they have the potential to provide people with social support, independence, and control over their lives. However the degree to which these services enhance the overall wellbeing of attendees, is likely vary according to individual needs, expectations and experiences.

People with ID may often feel isolated from their community and struggle to form meaningful relationships (Fleming & Kroese, 1990). Day centres or community learning centres will therefore help to facilitate the formation of bonds and relationships between the attendees, volunteers and staff members. This should be particularly beneficial as people with ID value the opportunities to engage with persons with and without similar disabilities, but also with those who had similar life experiences (Deguara *et al.*, 2012; McVilly *et al.*, 2006). By allowing these relationships to form, these centres aim to reduce loneliness amongst this population.

Additionally, many equip their attendees with life skills and qualifications that help them to lead more independent lives and find employment, usually within unskilled or semi-skilled professions (Cole & Williams, 2007). Finding employment proves to be a

challenge for many individuals with ID, as statistics show that despite 65% of adults being willing, only 6.6% manage to find employment (learningdisabilities.org.uk, 2014). Furthermore, many people with ID would prefer to live independently, with only some assistance (Deguara et al., 2012). Through teaching skills such as literacy or numeracy, these centres help their attendees to achieve independence.

Lastly, many centres aim to empower their attendees to have greater control over their lives, or to become more self-determined. This self-determination has been implicated in higher quality of life (Miller & Chan, 2008; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). Many centres aspire to assist individuals with ID in making their own life choices in order to maximise the positive impact of control.

While many centres aim to implement procedures which offer social support, life skills and greater independence, there is little research which explores attendees' perceptions of the benefits of these services and whether they are successful in achieving their aims. The present study will therefore use the grounded theory approach to explore what the service users consider to be the main benefits of attending such centres, and how these impact their lives. A better understanding of the impact of these centres is essential to assist the effective evaluation of such services.

Methods

Sample

A purposive sample of 4 female and 3 male participants was recruited from a Mencap facility in East Midlands in the UK. All participants had a mild level of disability, while their approximate age ranged from 23 to 54 years. All names and ages were changed to protect participants' anonymity.

Materials

An unstructured interview was used to allow participants to communicate their views freely. The interview began with background questions concerning the length of time the attendees have been at the centre and their roles within it, followed by reasons for attendance and benefits.

Procedure

Ethical approval for the study was granted by Nottingham Trent University Research ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from the facility and each individual participant before the interviews began. Interviews lasting up to one hour were conducted by the researcher, who was also a volunteer worker at this particular centre. This allowed the participants to be more comfortable and open during the interviews. While this meant that participants would sometimes seek the interviewer's opinions or support, the interviewer did not influence their responses and focused participants to their own opinions. The interviewer also ensured that their prior knowledge of the participant did not influence the

discussion and that the participant had opportunities to lead the conversation. These steps were taken to minimise researcher bias.

Analytic Procedure

Recorded interviews were transcribed and analysed using procedures common to a Grounded Theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Open coding was first used to explore themes that emerged from the data. Subsequently, selective coding was used to identify emerging sub-themes of each concept, which were reorganised and rewritten as the process went on. During this procedure memos were noted and sorted in order to establish the relationship between the main themes and the subthemes, as well as the overall impact on the individuals attending the centre.

Results

The initial analysis did indeed reveal the themes of life skills, social support and control as some of the main benefits of attending this particular centre. However, the sub-theme of 'internal control' and a theme of 'self-image' also emerged. The theme of 'self-image' consisted of three sub-themes: 'confidence', 'self-worth', and 'purpose'. These specific themes have received less attention within the literature and therefore, for the purpose of this brief report, the analysis will focus exclusively on the themes of 'internal control' and 'self-image'.

Insert Table 1 here

Control: Internal Control

Some participants reported having better control over their emotions and behaviours after attending the centre. This was partially due to greater understanding of others and their perspectives:

"...talking to other people, understanding people (0.9) and all that, and erm their opinions, different people's opinions. ...When something is right in their own way, but might not be right in my own way, doesn't mean it's not right."

The centre has therefore allowed this participant to control her argumentative side and become more tolerant towards others, through exposure to different individuals.

Other participants found that the support offered by the centre had even more dramatic changes on their self-esteem and behaviour:

"People said that, even 'Jack' said I've changed. 'Phoebe' said when I first came here I was abrupt (1.2) which means (1.6) quick temper, something to do with temper isn't it? Yeah, angry. But I calmed down a hell of a lot."

Self-Image: Confidence

Most participants expressed greater confidence in themselves and their abilities, following the mastery of new skills. The centre

therefore provided participants with the opportunity to build their self-belief and aid their psychological empowerment, simply by providing them with an opportunity to learn novel tasks at their own pace. The experience and accomplishments participants have achieved allowed them to feel pride, which further increased their confidence.

Furthermore, participants reported feeling more confident in social situations due to exposure to unfamiliar situations, tasks and people, which made new experiences less intimidating:

"...[Before attending the centre] I wouldn't have done the pack bags at Asda and it's talking to other people because it's the people who need the bags packing... I wouldn't have done that couple of years ago (1.3) but I'd do it now."

Self-Image: Self-Worth

The social stigma and the difficulty to 'fit in', that is often experienced by people with ID, can have an impact on their own perception. Many participants spoke about the respect they were starting to feel for themselves:

"Started liking myself... Pff, I never liked myself... Obviously [because of] the way (0.5) that I've been brought up, the way I've been treated over the years. (2.7) That's all changing and I'm a better person for it. I'm not a bad person."

Due to the social support and a sense of belonging given at the centre, the attendees begin to recover from the maltreatment they may have received. This allows them to build on their self-esteem and therefore self-respect. Participants also highlighted that this can be achieved through praise they receive for their work.

Self-Image: Purpose

All participants agreed that the centre provided participants with different opportunities, which gave them a reason to get up in the morning, as opposed to being “bored” or “wasting their life away”. For some participants, the centre meant doing something more meaningful that benefited others and gave their life a greater purpose:

“Yeah it made me more erm happy. I’ve got something to do with my life, like helping other people, raising money for other... erm things to do here and all that so it is--it’s a good thing.”

This analysis shows that many of the aspects of such centres can contribute to the enhancement of well-being in individuals with ID. The social support and activities offered by the centres can often lead to improved self-image and confidence, as well as giving people with ID a new sense of purpose in their lives. There is also evidence that attendees can obtain benefits in terms of the level of internal control they exert over their emotions and mood.

Discussion

These findings highlight the important psychological benefits of attending day and community learning centres for people with ID. The support received from the staff has significant impact, benefiting attendees' feelings of internal control and self-image. Furthermore, the feelings of acceptance engendered by these centres can help alleviate perceptions of stigma, which can be detrimental to self-esteem (Paterson *et al.*, 2012). The centre also gave participants a sense of purpose, which serves to develop a sense of identity and enhance wellbeing (Burrow & Hill, 2011). Interestingly, within the transcripts there was evidence that the themes of self-image and internal control had a reciprocal relationship, with each contributing to the enhancement of the other.

Previous research has highlighted how social support within community learning centres might lead to improvements in self-esteem through encouraging community participation (Abraham *et al.*, 2002). Similarly there is evidence that social support might serve to reduce anger and aggression by providing a means for individuals to develop appropriate adaptive behaviours (Lamoureux-Hébert *et al.*, 2010). Participants in this study acted more calmly after spending time at the centre, as they examined their thoughts and actions more rationally, which in turn supplemented their self-worth. In some cases the increased self-worth then further enhanced internal control, by reducing negative feelings and

improving self-belief. This finding concurs with previous research, which demonstrated the positive association between self-esteem and anger control (Ramanathan & Swaminathan, 2012).

The positive impact of attending community learning centres has never before been investigated from the service users' perspective. This report therefore provides a unique insight into some of the more subjective psychological benefits of attending such centres. Whilst issues of skill acquisition, social support and independence were evident in the transcripts, the participants alluded to important improvements relating to self-image and control of their emotions and behaviour. We acknowledge that this was a small study conducted in a single centre and therefore there are limits to which we can generalise from these findings. However it seems unlikely that such benefits are unique to this single centre and therefore further studies are needed in order to explore these issues across a range of care providers. A more detailed understanding how individuals can find benefit from attending these centres will facilitate the development of the services that they provide and allow a more complete evaluation of their effectiveness.

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***Table 1: A complete list of themes and sub-themes resulting
from open and selective coding.***

THEME	SUB-THEME
1. SKILLS	1. a) Work Experience 1. b) Qualifications 1. c) Independent Living
2. SOCIAL SUPPORT	2. a) Emotional Support 2. b) Information Support 2. c) Companionship
3. CONTROL	3. a) Internal 3. b) External
4. SELF-IMAGE	4. a) Confidence 4. b) Self-Worth 4. c) Purpose