Purposes of education for young people with severe learning difficulties: Exploring a vocational teaching resource - 'A stepping stone to…' what?

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Abstract

This article examines the purposes of education with a particular focus on young people with severe learning difficulties (SLD). The topic is explored with reference to a specific case, whereby some of the key findings of an evaluation of the first year of 'The Greenside Studio', an English special school's vocational teaching resource for young people with SLD, are presented. A conceptualisation of different 'sides' to the Studio is discussed in relation to the purposes of education for these learners in which the view of vocational learning as a stepping stone to paid employment and independence is presented as problematic. With a broader interpretation of vocational education this stepping stone is reconfigured as a bridge to life after school, whatever form that takes. It is argued, however, that the nature of this life must be viewed aspirationally.

Keywords: purposes of education; severe learning difficulties; special educational needs; vocational education

Introduction

In this article we examine the purposes of education for young people with severe learning difficulties (SLD)[1]. Our interest in this developed from a commissioned evaluation of an English special school's vocational teaching resource space, 'The Greenside Studio' (Lawson and Black, 2013). The project findings drew our attention to different perspectives about the purpose of the Studio and the meaning of vocational education for young people with SLD. This led us to consider further the wider purposes of education for these learners.

This examination is a timely one, as the UK government has recently clarified policy in England regarding young people with special educational needs (SEN) (DfE/DoH, 2015). One of the stated aims underpinning these policy revisions was to 'give young people who are disabled or who have SEN the best opportunities and support so that as far as possible they can succeed in education and their careers, live as independently and healthily as they are able to, and be active members of their communities' (DfE, 2012, p.50). The proposals also sought to provide 'access to better quality vocational and work-related learning options

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[1] Severe learning difficulties is an educational category in England which describes children and young people who 'are likely to need support in all areas of the curriculum and [have] associated difficulties with mobility and communication' (DfE/DoH, 2015, Section 6.30). Learning disabilities is frequently the term used when referring to adults. Internationally, the terminology is severe intellectual disabilities.

to enable young people to progress in their learning post-16' and to provide 'good opportunities and support in order to get and keep a job' (p.50). These ambitions are reflected in the revised Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice 0-25 (DfE/DoH, 2015): the principles of the code are designed to support a number of outcomes including 'successful preparation for adulthood, including independent living and employment' (DfE/DoH, 2015, p.19). Young people with SLD, however, perhaps by the very nature of their special educational need, frequently do not gain employment (DWP, 2013) nor live independently as adults. An emphasis on education as a preparation for employment and independent living thus may be inappropriate – so what is/should be the purpose of education for these young people? The aim of this article is to consider this question.

First we consider different educational paths, functions and purposes of learning in order to then examine purposes of education for children and young people with SLD. The evaluation project is described and data presented and discussed in relation to different 'sides' of the Studio. These data are then used to draw attention to the tensions evident regarding the purpose of education for learners with SLD.

Educational paths, functions and purposes

In any evaluation of educational provision and its associated outcomes, Biesta (2009) suggests that evaluators should consider the question of purpose (effective for *what*) and audience (effective for *whom*). In this section of the article we therefore describe and discuss different conceptualisations of the purpose/s of education in order to then consider the purpose/s of education for children and young people with SLD. The conceptualisations we describe are:

- different *educational paths* (liberal, vocational, academic, functional and social);
- Biesta's (2009) different *educational functions* (qualification, subjectification and citizenship); and
- Dee, Devecchi and Florian's (2006) different *purposes of learning* for people with learning difficulties (being, having and doing).

From a synthesis of these we outline three main categories of *purposes of education*: those related to person-becoming; those related to later life/vocation; and those purposes related to citizenship/society. We then discuss these in relation to the education of learners with SLD.

Educational paths

A number of commentators have identified different educational paths, which are often positioned as opposing binaries, for example: liberal education *or* vocational education (Pring, 2004; Stonier, 2013; Williams, 1994); functional education *or* academic education (Bouck, 2012); a functional approach *or* a social approach (Dee, 2006). These different paths are further explicated in Table 1. Being placed in opposition to each other, alternative paths are frequently regarded as discrete and separate and there is accompanying debate over which educational path should be privileged for different groups of young people. For example, Bouck (2012), in the US context, refers to an academic curriculum in the sense of the general curriculum most students receive, as opposed to a specific functional skills curriculum provided for children designated as having SEN. A similar perceived divide between academic and vocational paths has been the focus of much research and political review in the UK (Wolf, 2011; Hancock, 2014) and is seen as 'a persistent and deep' divide (Young, 2011, p.271).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

The assumed distinctiveness of these different educational paths, however, can be questioned. For example, Pring (2004) challenges the perceived dichotomy between liberal education and functional education and Bouck (2012) notes how a functional curriculum may contain both academic and vocational elements.

Educational functions of education and purposes of learning
Another way of conceptualising the purposes of education is through a consideration of its *functions.* Biesta (2009) proposes three major *functions of education*: subjectification, qualification, and citizenship. Dee et al. (2006) suggest related categories with regard to the *purposes of learning* for adults with learning difficulties: being, having and doing.

Biesta's (2009) *subjectification* function relates to a purpose of education in supporting the student in becoming a particular kind of person. It can be observed in the curriculum aims of schools in England: legislation states that the curriculum of state-funded schools must be one that 'promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school' (Education Act 2002, Section 78; DfE, 2014a, Section 2.1). 'Development' indicates that there will be a change in the person, as they become an individual, or a 'subject' (Biesta, 2009). This connects to some extent with Dee et al's (2006, p.2) *being* purpose of learning: 'developing a sense of and belief in one's own identity and who we want to become'. There would appear to be some difference, however, in relation to what drives

the intended change in the person, whether this is a societally defined or personally motivated development. Nevertheless, we call this 'person-becoming'.

The *qualification* function, here, does not refer to accredited qualifications, such as GCSEs or A levels in the English school system, but to providing young people with the knowledge, understanding and skills to 'do something' (Biesta, 2009, p.40). This could be specific training in a skill or technique, or to the introduction of a general topic, such as an introduction to modern culture (Biesta, 2009). This relates to Dee et al's (2006, p.2) *having* purpose of learning of 'acquiring new skills, knowledge and understanding'. As this concerns the provision of skills for later life, we call this the 'later-life/vocation' purpose of education. Again, this purpose can be observed within curriculum aims: the curriculum in state-funded schools in England must 'prepare pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life' (Education Act 2002, Section 78; DfE, 2014a, Section 2.1).

These curriculum aims also relate to a final purpose of preparing a young person for their role in society, their citizenship. For Biesta (2009), this is the *socialisation* function, inserting individuals into existing ways of doing, becoming members of and part of society. For Dee et al. (2006) this is the *doing* purpose of learning, the student becoming empowered and enabled to participate in society. This purpose we label the 'citizenship' purpose of education.

Pring (2004) asserts that the most important educational experience is assistance with how to live one's life, which can be seen as flowing through these different purposes. Pring (2004, p.59) describes this assistance as a process: helping the young person clarify 'the style of life judged worth living' (person-becoming); 'identifying the training and work that will enable one to live that life' (later life/vocation purpose); 'questioning the ends and values embodied within it' (citizenship purpose); and 'acquiring the necessary skills and competences' (later life/vocation purpose).

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Table 2 illustrates approximate and tentative links between the different typologies explored which will now be examined in relation to the education of learners with SLD.

Purposes of education for learners with SLD

Distinctions made between the person-becoming, later life/vocation and citizenship purposes of education described in the previous section seem to particularly blur and overlap when considering the education of children and young people with SLD. Until 1970 this group were classified as 'ineducable' in England and Wales (Education (Handicapped Children) Act 1970 Act). Since that time different broad emphases in school curricula for these learners can be identified (Byers and Lawson, 2015): curricula based on checklists of 'normal' early developmental skills in areas such as 'cognitive development' and 'perceptual-motor skills' in the 1970s (see, for example, Uzgiris and Hunt, 1975); a focus in the 1980s on functional 'skills for life' curricula involving aspects such as shopping and making simple meals (see, for example, Staff of Rectory Paddock School, 1981); subject content-based curricula centred on the national curriculum during the 1990s (see, for example, Carpenter, Ashdown and Bovair, 1996; NCC, 1992); and an integrated personalised curricula approach in the 2000s, with a balance between shared content and individualised needs (see, for example, Sebba, 2009). These different curricula emphases portray apparently different educational purposes for this particular group of learners. At times these purposes seem very separate from those for typically-developing learners, for example, in a focus on functional skills for life. At other times, the purposes seem more similar, for example, in following an academic path, accessing and developing knowledge and understanding inherent within different subjects.

Current English policy documentation in the area of SEN also presents a mixture of purposes of education. For example, the SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015, p.19) emphasises the achievement of educational outcomes but, as previously noted, also mentions other outcomes related to employment, independent living, health and community participation (p. 120), which are considered essential in enhancing the life chances of disabled young people and in preparing for adulthood (Preparing for Adulthood, 2013). A later life/vocation perspective for most young people in preparing for adulthood involves some kind of paid employment aspirations, thus preparation for the world of work is a key aspect. The situation for young people with SEN/disabilities, and particularly for learners with SLD, is rather different. Research shows that young people with disabilities have lower rates of employment than the rest of the population (DWP, 2011; Durkin, Fraser and Conti-Ramsden, 2012; OfSTED, 2011). In addition, although many people with learning difficulties aspire to having a job, opportunities for achieving paid employment are particularly scarce (Lundy, Bryne and McKeown, 2012). A national indicator report (HSCIC, 2012) found that only 6.6% of adults known to social services with moderate to severe learning difficulties were in paid employment at the time and another report noted that 79% of people with severe learning disabilities have never worked (DWP, 2013). Durkin et al. (2012)

acknowledge that over the past few decades in the UK, professionals, policy makers and researchers have sought to improve transition from school to employment for young people with disabilities. They add, however, that experiences and outcomes vary according to nature of disability and need and that research and policy often neglects to explore provision for young people with learning difficulties. There is some research around supported employment (for example, Beyer and Robinson (2009) and Kaehne and Beyer's (2013) work in the area of peer support) although there are very few examples of research in this area focussing on people with severe learning disabilities (Gore, Forrester-Jones and Young's (2013) study of staff experiences of supported employment is an exception) and opportunities for people with more severe learning disabilities remain limited and rare, especially in times of economic recession.

Work awareness and work experience, however, have been found to be significantly related to future employment for young people with learning difficulties (Beyer and Kaehne, 2008). In order for these young people to make the transition to the possibility of paid employment, therefore, it is argued that they need to receive careers planning and undergo work experience while still at school or in full-time education (Lundy et al., 2012). Stonier (2013) expresses concern, however, that students with SLD move from one vocational course to another, gaining qualifications and skills that they may not be given the opportunity to use. He argues that, as some young people may not be able to gain employment, this negates the need for a vocational curriculum. Other commentators argue that '*education towards employment* is worthwhile even if it does not ultimately lead to paid, open employment' (Baynes and Dyson, 1994, p.145, original emphasis) as it positions people with learning difficulties 'in the same social arena as people in paid employment' (p.145).

Furthermore, the notion of 'vocational learning' is interpreted widely for learners with SLD. Lawson, Waite and Robertson examined English special school teachers' perspectives on vocational learning in school education for young people with severe and profound learning difficulties (Lawson et al., 2005; Waite et al., 2006). From 125 questionnaire returns the following understandings of vocational learning were discerned:
- preparation for future life;
- life skills for independence;
- careers education about what different jobs might entail;
- work experience;
- learning beyond the classroom and community links;
- experiential learning;

- development of autonomy and responsibility for self and own learning;
- development of opportunities for choice and personal preference.

These portray a broad understanding of the meaning and operationalisation of 'vocational learning' for young people with SLD, spanning the purposes of education discussed earlier. Similarities are evident between these understandings and the SEND Code of Practice emphases on employment, independent living and community participation (health is not mentioned, however). Purposes of later life/vocation can be seen, with a focus on preparation for future life, life skills for independence, careers education and work experience, and the citizenship purpose is apparent to some extent through community links. There are also elements of the person-becoming purpose – the development of autonomy and responsibility for the self, with opportunities for choice and personal preference. For some learners, according to the teachers' perspectives in Lawson et al's (2005) study, vocational learning centres on preparation for work; for other learners, however, vocational learning more explicitly incorporates the person-becoming and citizenship purposes of education. As one teacher in their study noted:

> *'Vocational learning is preparing for post-school [and] varies for individual pupils. Some can include careers/work experience (either in school, sheltered or independent), [for] others it's daily living and recreational and leisure skills'*
>
> (Lawson et al., 2005, p.15)

Vocational learning is thus here interpreted as beyond preparation for (paid) employment but as preparation for adult life generally in whatever form that may take.

It can be seen, then, that the purposes of education for young people with SLD cannot be easily defined or categorised. So what purposes of education does the Greenside Studio in the evaluation project provide for, or offer to, the young people with SLD? It is depicted by the school as a vocational teaching resource. How is vocational learning understood? Is the Studio solely related to the later life/vocation purpose of education? We now turn to part of the evaluation of the Studio, starting with a description of the Studio and the project itself.

The Greenside Studio evaluation project

Greenside School is an all age special school (3-19 years) for young people with severe and profound and multiple learning difficulties (SLD/PMLD). The Greenside Studio is a physical place and space in a shopping precinct local to the school. The Studio incorporates an 'old fashioned' sweet shop, a classroom/ceramics area and kiln room, and a kitchen diner/work area. The Studio is viewed by the school as a 'specialist, vocational teaching resource,

based within the heart of the school's local community' (Greenside School, 2014) and is mainly a resource for the post-16 age group. It is described by the school as follows:

> 'A 'living classroom', this local shop premises provides young people who have severe or profound learning difficulties with exceptional opportunities to undertake work related learning, including vocational courses designed to develop communication, social-interaction and independence skills'. (Greenside School, 2014)

Thus, the Studio is seen at a school policy level to be related to vocational work-related learning and the development of functional skills, all based within the community.

We were approached by Greenside School to evaluate the first year of the Studio's operation focussing on five main areas: use of the Studio; its purpose and rationale; student learning; the Studio's success and how to determine it; and future development and potential. Two main data collection tools were used, within a survey methodology (Fink, 2003). The first was an online staff questionnaire designed for response by teachers across the school, as well as targeting staff in the Post-16 Department, in order to gain an overview of use of, and views about, the Studio. The second involved semi-structured interviews with various targeted school members – staff, students, parents and a governor to enable more detailed exploration. These were supplemented by an examination of school documentation about the Studio's purpose and use, timetabling documentation and relevant student records. The project met the ethical guidelines set out by British Educational Research Association (2011). All participants were provided with information about the project, written and/or verbal, and interviewees gave their verbal consent. Most participants are anonymised within this article and effort has been made to ensure that students, parents, teachers/tutors and teaching assistants (TAs) are not easily identifiable. It was indicated to interview participants who are in a very specific role that they may be identifiable (for example, headteacher, shop manager, creative partner).

A 10 question online questionnaire was constructed based on the evaluation areas. The majority of the questions were open ended and required qualitative responses, rather than restrict responses to pre-determined categories. Three questions required either a one word answer (eg What is your role?) or selection from a provided scale/options (eg Have the children you work with used the Studio?). A draft version of the questionnaire was reviewed by the headteacher and the post-16 coordinator responsible for the Studio and minor adaptations made. The link to the online questionnaire was forwarded electronically to school staff: to all teachers in the school; to teachers, tutors and TAs in the Post-16 Department; and to the shop manager (an overall total of approximately 40 people). Staff

were informed about the questionnaire in a staff briefing and the link was live for two weeks; teachers were given time in a staff meeting to complete the questionnaire and TAs were given time during the school day. There were 27 responses to the online questionnaire (18 teachers, four TAs, three members of the senior management team, the shop manager and a college student who was on work experience at the school), a response rate of approximately 68%.

The sampling method for the interviews was purposive (Bryman, 2008) in order to incorporate a variety of school participants with an interest in the Studio. Specific individual people were identified and asked to participate – headteacher, deputy headteacher, post-16 coordinator, shop manager and creative partner. Volunteers were also requested from the teachers/tutors and TAs who used the Studio and the post-16 coordinator identified interested parents, a governor and students. The semi-structured interviews took the form of interview-conversations (Kvale, 1996); in the majority of cases these were carried out by the second author over the telephone and audio-recorded. One person chose to respond to the questions via email. Two students were interviewed; these were two of the four students who most regularly used the Studio facilities. They were asked questions by a TA they were familiar with and the TA scribed their responses. The prepared interview questions included questions asked in the questionnaire with the aim of seeking further detail, (eg 'what do you think is the purpose of/ rationale behind Greenside Studio?') and follow up questions from the questionnaire findings (eg 'how can the success of the Studio be evaluated?'). The post-16 coordinator devised questions for the students based on her knowledge of the students and the evaluation foci.

21 people (in addition to the two students) were approached to participate and a convenient time was arranged for them to be contacted and interviewed – 15 interviews were subsequently carried out, making a total of 17 interviews including the two student interviews. The length of the interviews ranged from 7 to 32 minutes with an average length of 17 minutes. Table 3 details the role of the interview and questionnaire participants.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Data analysis

Questionnaire data were analysed by question. Three questions requiring short responses or selections on a scale were tallied and open coding was carried out for qualitative responses (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Open codes were combined to form broader categories. For example, in response to the question 'what do you think is the purpose of/ rationale behind

the Greenside Studio?' a category was 'to provide…' which consisted of sub-categories according to what was provided, such as 'opportunities', 'an environment' and 'curriculum' (see Figure 1).

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Initial interview data analysis took the form of the two researchers separately listening to the same four interview recordings and identifying key overarching themes. A meeting was held between the researchers to discuss these emerging themes which were agreed, defined, then applied to the remaining interviews (investigator triangulation, Patton, 1990). Any new emerging themes were also noted, and shared between the researchers. The themes were also applied to the emailed version received from one participant.

The overall evaluation project findings relate to the five main project areas (use, purpose and rationale, student learning, evaluation and success, and development and potential) and four emerging themes (sides of the Studio, alternative educational environment, space, and community). These are fully reported elsewhere (Lawson and Black, 2013; Smith, 2014). The findings presented here form part of a discussion about the purposes of the Studio with regard to the purposes of education for learners with SLD. For this article we therefore focus on the evaluation project areas of use, purpose/rationale and success of the Studio and the theme of 'sides of the Studio'.

Uses, purposes, success and 'sides' of the Studio
Timetable documentation showed the main timetabled uses of the Studio were activities for students in the post-16 age group: travel training (*en route* to and from the Studio), work experience, and the processes involved in preparing lunch. The timetable also showed that the Studio was used, much less frequently, as a base for exploring and using facilities in the local community, for pottery/ceramics sessions, for sensory sessions for students with PMLD, and for cooking sessions.

Table 4 tracks the identified uses of the Studio stated in the questionnaire and interview responses through sub-categories and categories generated; illustrative examples of open coding (in italics) and raw data are also provided. The majority of responses referred to the use of the Studio for the development of students' skills, although the use of the Studio for curriculum purposes and as a community base was also mentioned. Purposes of the Studio may be implied by the stated uses. A number of purposes were also explicitly identified as shown in Table 5. Many of these were related to the young people with SLD themselves, for

example: the provision of a safe environment, an extended curriculum and experience of the world of work; an opportunity to develop and practise various skills; and extending learning. However, the analysis also reveals purposes beyond the young people engaged in the provision, for example, giving opportunities for collaboration and relationships within the community.

INSERT TABLES 4 AND 5

The data analysis led to the notion of 'sides', a term used by the post-16 coordinator ('I oversee the educational side of the studio' (PC-int)), as a way of expressing and perhaps visualising the multiple uses and purposes of the Studio evident through the data analysis. Different sides to the Studio's operation can be identified (see Figure 2):

- the educational side – 'ensuring the school is getting the best out of the shop as far as education is concerned' (PC-int), to allow students to 'experience wider educational aspects in context of a shop setting' (Tf);
- the creative side – having a clay and kiln facility, enabling 'art skills, thinking creatively … the sensory element' of playing with and shaping clay (CP-int), 'engaging in new creative activity' (TAd);
- the business side - running the shop, getting customers in, financial imperatives – 'to be a profitable independent shop' (TAc), open 6 days a week, 'a sweet shop and ceramic studio in own right' (H-int);
- the vocational side - providing relevant work experience, 'primarily a work experience programme for some of the students of Greenside School' (SM-qu), 'to provide an environment … where young people are contributing to the workforce' (PC-qu);
- the community side – being positioned in, being part of and being used by the community - 'we receive a lot of positive feedback through our website and Facebook™ page from people who have visited us' (SM-int).Also having a role in 'educating' the community – 'extremely valuable for the presence of people with disabilities within the local community' (To);
- the personal development side - 'the shop, the actual selling of the sweets is not…a priority; the priority is what the students are getting out of it' (TA1), '[My son] has increased in confidence. He's been more vocal [since attending the Studio]' (P2).

To some extent these different sides may also indicate boundaries between different responsibilities as will be discussed later.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Although described in school policy documentation primarily as a vocational teaching resource, the policy documentation (Greenside School, 2012, p.10) outlines a range of different aims which we can relate to these 'sides'. This documentation states that the Studio aspires to enable young people with learning difficulties to:

- 'Learn skills to enable them to gain some form of employment, suited to their interests, skills and experience' – this relates to the vocational, personal development and educational sides.
- 'Develop interpersonal and communication skills through working with members of the public; they will gain greater confidence and further their self-esteem' – this aim relates to the personal development and educational sides.
- 'Gain accredited qualifications in vocational skills' – this relates specifically to the vocational side.
- 'Transform expectations, their own, those of their family and those of the general public' – this reflects the personal development and the community sides.
- 'Provide opportunities for progression to pursue employment that reflects their interests, skills and ambitions' – this aim relates to the personal development, the vocational and the educational sides.

The documentation thus incorporates four of the six sides identified through the questionnaires and interviews; it does not make reference to the business or creative sides.

Interpretations of success also seem to be linked to the different 'sides'. Three main aspects of success were mentioned. Firstly, student learning and progress, relating to both the educational and the personal development sides of the Studio: 'if students continue to make progress it's a successful project' (P2). Success is also indicated in more personal, social and emotional ways because the students are happy and enjoy themselves and there is a difference in their behaviour. A parent recounted that, in being given greater responsibility and being able to be 'more his own person', her son's behaviour had changed substantially over the year such that the class teacher had told the parent, 'I know a different person now' (P1).Secondly, the degree and quality of community use of, interest in and involvement with the Studio was suggested as an indicator of success, that the Studio was valued within the community and used by members of the public, and raised the profile of the school and young people with learning difficulties. 'If people know about the shop and when they talk about the shop, they talk about the school. They talk about the types of kids that it services, then I think it will have had a good social role in creating links with the local community and

raising the status of kids with learning difficulties in [this town]' (CP-int). Thirdly, business profit and sustainability were mentioned. This was reflected in the questionnaire responses: when asked 'what is the possible long term potential of Greenside Studio?' responses included 'fundraising/profit making' (Te), 'to be a profitable independent shop' (TAb), and the post-16 coordinator mentioned sustainability and replicability, 'that it is sustainable as a business in its own right… part of a chain of similar outlets in different community areas' (PC, qu). This was also reflected in the interviews with the shop manager and the assistant head , both discussing footfall and finance. Success, then, was envisaged in relation to four of the six sides; reference was not made to the creative side, nor, interestingly, to the vocational side.

The evaluation project report to the school (Lawson and Black, 2013) indicated that the Studio had had a successful first year. The 'learning curve' for all involved had been immense – in terms of understanding a retail business environment, incorporating educational curricula within this, developing the business (and deciding how far, and how, to develop the business), and managing the complex timetabling and travel logistics of staff and students. It was noted that learning opportunities in a range of areas (eg retail, travel, cookery, ceramics) were evidently developing. The report highlighted a number of tensions, issues and questions which were intended support discussions around the Studio's development, for example, understanding of community, clarity of purpose and vision and its use as a viable employment facility. Some of these are discussed in this article too. The Studio was seen as an exciting place, as easily accessible and in being 'special' seemed to motivate staff and students to use it.

Discussion: Studio evaluation project
The Studio evaluation project highlights the importance of viewing and appreciating different sides – the different sides of the Studio illustrate a range of, sometimes contrasting, perspectives each of which may need to be acknowledged when considering, as noted earlier, questions of effectiveness for what and for whom (Biesta, 2009). This conceptualisation of sides supports a broad yet nuanced understanding of the Studio. Perceptions of the Studio, its uses, purposes and success, are mediated through the environment it is seen to provide, and the affordances of this environment. It may be regarded, for example, as a sweet shop and ceramic studio, a real life work environment, a classroom, a creative space, and/or a base within the community. Respondents' views of the Studio are partly determined by their position, for example: the school senior managers emphasise work experience; teachers and tutors tend to focus on curriculum; parents express greater interest in the personal and social aspects; and TAs are often focussed on

the day-to-day activity level. Dee (2006) suggests that professionals' viewpoints are mediated through their perceptions of young people's needs, their interpretation of policies and procedures, and their own personal agendas. This can be illustrated by imagining the view of Figure 2 from different perspectives. For example, the shop manager may look at the business side and this may dominate their vision, although there may be some awareness of the other sides of the Studio; the creative practitioner may take another position with the creative side at the forefront. Perhaps this is to be expected, as people have different expectations, roles and experiences (for example, strategic and operational); a comparison between the TAs' and the senior management teams' questionnaire responses, for example, indicates that the TA view is not totally different, but tends to reflect only part of the senior management team's vision. An interesting observation is that TAs are frequently residents of the local community which may explain why they often emphasise interaction with the public and the community side.

Prioritisation and possible competition between sides is interesting to consider. For example, the creative side seems to be regarded as a minor aspect of the Studio, not even mentioned by some participants, and the rapid development of the business side may mitigate against greater student independence, as there may sometimes be insufficient time for students to undertake tasks independently. Additionally, it is interesting to reflect on where the balance should lie between different sides. The Post-16 Prospectus (Greenside School, 2012, p.10) highlights the development of 'softer' skills, for example, 'interpersonal and communication skills through working with members of the public' and the importance of supporting students in gaining 'greater confidence and further[ing] their self-esteem'. The staff interviews, however, revealed that these aspects are less planned for and assessed than the 'harder' functional skills, for example, lunch preparation skills. This perhaps, then, indicates a tendency to focus on the more measurable practical skills at the expense of the less tangible, a problem that Biesta (2009) argues is endemic of current educational practice. Some school policy documentation positions the Studio as a vocational teaching resource with an emphasis on work-related and vocational learning (Greenside School, 2014). Other documentation (Greenside School, 2012) and the questionnaire and interview findings, however, also reveal evidence of wider interpretations of vocational learning, as identified through Waite et al's research (2006) presented earlier. For some participants the Studio was regarded as a 'bridge' (H, int) or a 'stepping stone' (P2). However, with a broader understanding of vocational learning, it is not entirely clear what it is seen as a stepping stone or bridge to: to wider forms of employment, perhaps, to the next stage of life (for example, college, residential setting), and/or to the 'real' world. So does the Studio provide a bridge or stepping stone to life after school whatever form that life may take? For example,

the creative side of the Studio would seem to offer the possibility for liberal educational pursuits which Stonier (2013) proposes as inherently valuable activities in themselves and the Studio may provide greater opportunities for community inclusion, considered important as one aspect of equal life chances in adulthood (Preparing for Adulthood, 2011).

Discussion: Purposes of education for learners with SLD

The earlier analysis of educational paths, functions and purposes of learning identified three main purposes of education for *all* learners (person-becoming, later life/vocation and citizenship) and considered their applicability for learners with SLD. The Studio evaluation project analysis reveals that many of the purposes of education are evident through the different identified *sides* of the provision. For example: the later life/vocation purpose of education is highlighted in the vocational side of the Studio, as well as the educational side; the personal development side, and perhaps the creative side, relate to the person-becoming purpose of education; the citizenship purpose of education is reflected in the community side of the Studio. The business side seems to sit outside the purposes of education, but perhaps is necessary to enable the other sides to occur. For learners with SLD, and as demonstrated through the Studio evaluation project, we have noted that: 1) these purposes of education are particularly difficult to disentangle; and 2) that vocational learning is afforded a much wider interpretation as preparation for adult life and independence more generally, with preparation for employment as relevant to only some learners.

'Preparation for adulthood' also has a specific emphasis in SEN policy reforms in England, being the focus of a dedicated Department for Education funded programme (Preparing for Adulthood, 2011) and the focus of a whole chapter in the SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015). Notions of adulthood are typically denoted by a number of culturally determined markers such as financial independence through employment, non-dependent family roles, and personal autonomy (Dee 2006; Konstam, 2015). An apparent emphasis on preparation for employment can be currently noted in education generally (Hill, 2010) giving prominence to one aspect of the later life/vocation purpose. This emphasis on preparing for paid employment is also a policy imperative for people with learning disabilities with perceived economic as well as personal and social benefits. The National Audit Office (2011) report *Oversight of special education for young people aged 16-25*, for example, estimated that supporting one person with a learning disability into employment could, in addition to improving their independence and self-esteem, increase that person's income by between 55 and 95 per cent. As noted earlier in this article, however, the prospect of paid employment for people with SLD is currently unlikely. Indeed, the SEND Code of Practice

(DfE/DoH, 2015, p.77) seems to suggest that paid employment is not necessarily a realistic aspiration or possibility for some people with learning disabilities, instead mentioning alternative provision of advice and support with regard to 'meaningful occupation' and 'active participation in local communities'.

Independent living is also an aspect in policy related to preparation for adulthood. The SEND Code of Practice extends 'independent living' beyond accommodation and living arrangements to young people 'having choice, control and freedom over their lives and the support they have' (DfE/DoH, 2015, p.122). Gaining such independence along with employability is considered 'life transforming' for young people with SEN (p.122). Interpreting concepts of independence and autonomy for people with learning disabilities, however, is challenging, relating to historical understandings of normalisation (Simpson, 1998) and aligned with neoliberal expectations about not being a burden on society (Lero, Pletsch and Hibrecht, 2012). These concepts are also often exclusionary for people with severe learning disabilities (Vorhaus, 2005; MacIntyre, 2014) where possibilities for choice and control have been shown to be particularly restricted (for example, Petner-Arrey and Copeland, 2015).

Thus policy emphases on preparation for adulthood with a focus on employment and independence are problematic for learners with SLD. Further, research around transition from school, Carroll (2015) argues, has itself been over-concerned with these two aspects and can thus be seen as perpetuating a deficit model – *not in* employment, *not* independent. A clear tension is apparent here: employment and independence are considered key elements for adult life, and crucial aspects of the later life/vocation purpose of education, but, as typically conceived, are seemingly exclusionary for many people with SLD.

We see two different possible policy responses for this, both, however, with inherent tensions. The first is that *broader purposes of education for **all** young people should be more vociferously and explicitly recognised.* This means looking beyond traditional divisions of educational paths, and may entail the highlighting of person-becoming and citizenship purposes in addition to the later life/vocation purpose of education. It may enable a more extensive understanding of vocational learning, as expressed in the Studio project and elsewhere (Waite et al, 2006), as preparation for later life rather than solely preparation for employment. Biesta's (2009, p.40) qualification function focuses on providing young people with the knowledge skills and understanding to 'do something' – must this 'something' be geared towards employment and independence? An issue and possible exclusionary danger here, however, would seem to be how, and by whom, the nature of later life for people with SLD is decided and/or interpreted – for many years, as noted earlier, assumptions about

young people with SLD's later life have not included employment, and vocational learning has therefore emphasised practical functional life and independence skills, such as shopping and cooking, at the expense of employability skills.

Secondly, *employment should be a legitimate aspiration and presumption for young people with SLD.* This could imply an extended interpretation of 'employment' so that wider understandings of employment, as part of the later-life/vocational purpose of education, are explicitly built into education for learners with SLD. Employment in this way may not be regarded solely as a paid job, but as a meaningful way of spending one's time – 'meaningful occupation' (DfE/DoH, 2015, p.77). Again, however, this could be interpreted as exclusionary evasion – just extending the interpretation of 'employment' to be more inclusive, evading the issue and still excluding people with SLD from the arena of paid employment. Alternatively, it could support the development of authentic employment opportunities for people with SLD. Supported employment policies have existed for many years (see Beyer and Robinson's review, 2009) and a number of government initiatives for people with learning disabilities have existed (for example, DoH, 2009; Valuing People Now, 2011). Different approaches have been promoted, for example, job coaching and peer mentoring (O'Toole, 2015) and resources developed and provided for further education colleges (for example, Jacobsen, 2010), schools and parents (for example, Aspirations for Life, 2013; FPLD, 2014). A range of 'imaginative approaches' (DfE/DoH, 2015, p.130) continue to be encouraged including taster opportunities, work experience and supported internships (DfE, 2014b); the Studio provides one such imaginative approach. It is also noted that preparing for work often incorporates indirect employability skills 'such as communication and social skills, using assistive technology, and independent travel training' (DfE/DoH, 2015, p.132) and these can be identified in the Studio provision too. Funding for such initiatives, however, is frequently haphazard and reduced at times of economic austerity and the choices for people with SLD are frequently limited (Gosling and Cotterill, 2000), so this response would require political and financial commitment.

Concluding comments

We argue, then, that Pring's (2004, p.59) assertion that 'the most important of all educational experiences' is 'assistance with how to live one's own life' needs critical attention for learners with SLD, such that different purposes of education are *all* considered in preparation for adult life. The evaluation of the Studio and the presentation of different sides shows that there are tensions around the perceived nature of this preparation and, thus, this adult life. The Studio is presented as a stepping stone, but it is not clear what it is a stepping stone to. A stepping stone to paid employment and independence has been presented as

problematic. With a broader interpretation of vocational education this stepping stone may be reconfigured as a bridge to life after school, whatever form that takes. But we have also discussed how this may perpetuate exclusionary assumptions and practices. So the nature of this life must be viewed aspirationally – it is therefore imperative to consider how education can support young people (with SLD) to determine their own aspirations for life.

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Table 1

Educational path	Explication
Liberal	- learning for learning's sake, emphasis upon the learners' enrichment as persons (Williams, 1994) - chief aim to improve the capacity to think, understand and 'appreciate what is worthy of appreciation' (Pring, 2004, p.50) - not viewed as a means to an end - requires an expert to pass on a body of knowledge to a 'novice' (Pring, 2004)
Vocational (task-specific for a specific purpose)	- aim to enhance 'competence' at the tasks adults have to perform, for example, work (Pring, 2004) - develop the skills to do specific tasks (Pring, 2004; Williams, 1994) - 'applicable' knowledge (Williams, 1994) - 'useful learning', a means to an end (Pring, 2004) - engagement in the 'real world' of work (Pring, 2004)
Academic (accreditation in specific subjects)	- theoretical (Williams, 1994) - a small number of curricular domains, particularly language, science and mathematics (Biesta, 2009) - associated with written exams, focus on content, stressing abstract and theoretical knowledge (McCulloch, 2008) - high status (McCulloch, 2008)
Functional (general skills for adult life)	- doing rather than thinking, acquisition of skills rather than knowledge (Pring, 2004) - 'teaching students the necessary skills to function in adult life' (Bouck, 2012, p.1176) - improving numeracy and literacy skills (Dee, 2006) - 'life skills' (Bouck, 2012) - 'seeks to prepare students for their subsequent environments' (Bouck, 2012, p.1176)
Social (for the benefit of society)	- recognising the social nature of learning and fostering citizenship (Dee, 2006) - reference to the greater social good to which the person contributes (Pring, 2004) - 'awareness of the social and economic context in which one acts or lives' (Pring, 2004, p.79)

Table 1: Types of educational path

Table 2

Educational paths (Pring, 2004; Bouck, 2012; Williams, 1994; Dee, 2006)	Functions of education (Biesta, 2009)	Purposes of learning for adults with learning difficulties (Dee et al., 2006)	Purposes of education
Liberal	Subjectification	Being	Person-becoming
Vocational	Qualification	Having	Later life/vocation
Academic			
Functional			
Social	Socialisation	Doing	Citizenship

Table 2: Educational paths, functions and purposes

Table 3:

Participant	Questionnaire		Interview	
	Number	**Code**	**Number**	**Code**
Students (facilitated and scribed by TA)	0		2	S1-2
Parents of post-16 students who use the Studio	0		2	P1-2
School governor	0		1	G
Headteacher	1	H, qu	1	H, int
Deputy headteacher	1	DH, qu	1	DH, int
Post-16 coordinator and vocational lead in the Studio	1	PC, qu	1	PC, int
Teachers/tutors who lead groups at the Studio	17	Ta-q	4	T1-4
Teaching assistants who have worked alongside post-16 students in the Studio	4	TAa-d	3	TA1-3
Creative partner who leads the pottery/ceramic sessions for the school at the Studio	1	CP, qu	1	CP, int
Shop manager	1	SM, qu	1	SM, int
College student	1	CS	0	
Total	**27**		**17**	

Table 3: Role of interview and questionnaire participants

Table 4:

Categories	Open code examples/ Raw data and sources
Development of students' skills	*Functional skills* – 'I count money. I weigh up sweets and put them into sweet bags. Help people make drinks. Clean kitchen after making lunch.' (S2) *Practical skills* *Independence and life skills* *Literacy and numeracy skills* - 'develop numeracy, literacy, retail skills within a real environment' (PC , qu) *Communication skills (with peers and public)* *Personal skills* *Social skills* *ICT skills* *Problem solving skills* - 'getting them to think for themselves' (TA3)
Curriculum areas	*Work experience/ work-related learning* – 'It is primarily a work experience programme' (SM, qu) *ASDAN units* *Creative activities, ceramic painting*' - Making Egyptian pots' (CP, int) *Cookery (make and eat meals)* *Making materials for the shop* *ICT* *Curriculum extension* *Personalisation -tailoring to individual* 'What we want them to get out of it depends on ability of the student, work on [accreditation] units that best meet their needs' (TA1) *Work on specific subjects (literacy, numeracy, skills, creativity)* 'Real life learning situations' (Te)
Community base	'our students and members of the public are encouraged to use the studio as a living space (TAa) *Students being part of community* – 'Links with the community, […] that they, the student, can all be belong to a bigger group based on a locality as a community (Tn) *Hosting meetings* *Class base* *Public use* –' For the community providing a venue for workshops and parties' (DH, qu)

Table 4: Participant responses regarding use of the Studio in thematic categories

Table 5:

Categories	Sub-categories/*Open code examples*/Raw data and sources
To provide:	**An environment** – 'to give Post 16 students a safe environment to learn life skills' (Tc), 'Nice for kids to be out of school environment' (CP, int) *'Real life'*- 'students the opportunity of experiencing a real work environment where they are customer facing' (Tl) **A curriculum** – 'To provide an exciting element to a 21st century curriculum for young people up to the age of 25.' (PC, qu); where pupils can work on specific subject areas (*literacy, numeracy, skills, creativity*), *life skills, vocational skills* **Opportunities** – 'Opportunities for learners to explore certain resources relating to the studio' (Tf); 'Provides opportunities to develop work skills for students who may not necessarily access conventional work experience' (PC, qu) **Work experience – '**Venue to enable some vocational skills. Quality work experience was problematic – the nature and complexity of our client group's difficulties increased. It can be difficult to find appropriate venues and support in terms of staffing levels' (H, int), 'Work experience and skills for the future' (TAd). **A public demonstration** 'To provide a public demonstration of the qualities, skills and talents of young people with learning difficulties'. (H, qu),
To develop/ reinforce/ practise:	**Skills** - *Life skills, Work skills, Community skills, Functional skills , Independence skills, Community learning skills,* **Community integration** **Positive awareness** - 'I think it will have had a good social role in creating links with the local community and raising the status of kids with learning difficulties in Stevenage' (CP, int)
To extend/ promote:	**Learning beyond** the school day, beyond the classroom/school, beyond the age of 19 (enabling provision to age 25) and beyond the traditional school year – 'Extending learning opportunities after school (3.00-5.00), summer holiday, Saturday' (H, int). The classroom is now extended into the community – 'Extended teaching space. Links with the wider community' (Tm) **Learning in the community -** 'although they make efforts to go and meet the community, it's fairly limited and I think this [The Studio] has helped.' (P2) **Skills –** 'promotes independence skills' (Tq) **Collaboration** – 'Developing relationships within the wider community. Use by extended ed for ex pupils, links with college' (Th)
To build relationships/ collaboration:	**With partner agencies** 'To further build relationships that Greenside has with partner agencies and the community' (PC, qu) **With the (wider) community –** 'Developing relationships within the wider community […], links with college' (Th) **Use by other groups –** 'Link to other local schools/ special schools for others to experience benefits/training' (Te) **To develop links with local colleges –** 'Partnership with the college and other providers when students leave school.' (Tb)

Table 5: Participant responses regarding purposes of the Studio in thematic categories

Figure 1:

QUESTION	CATEGORY	SUB-CATEGORY	RAW DATA

QUESTION

Q4: What do you think is the purpose of/ rationale behind Greenside Studio?

CATEGORY

To develop/reinforce

To extend/ enhance/ promote

To provide

To build relationships/ collaboration

SUB-CATEGORY

Environment

Curriculum

Opportunities

Work experience

Public demonstration

RAW DATA

'External classroom for older students or those that find the school **environment** difficult to access. **Opportunity to** practise work skills' (Th)

'Provide **opportunities** for young people with learning difficulties to **develop** skills for work and skills for life within a **real environment**.' (PC, qu)

'To allow students the **opportunity** of experiencing a real work environment where they are customer facing… gives the **opportunity** to work on specific subjects like maths and English …. also an **opportunity** for the community to be involved with and support the school.' (Tl)
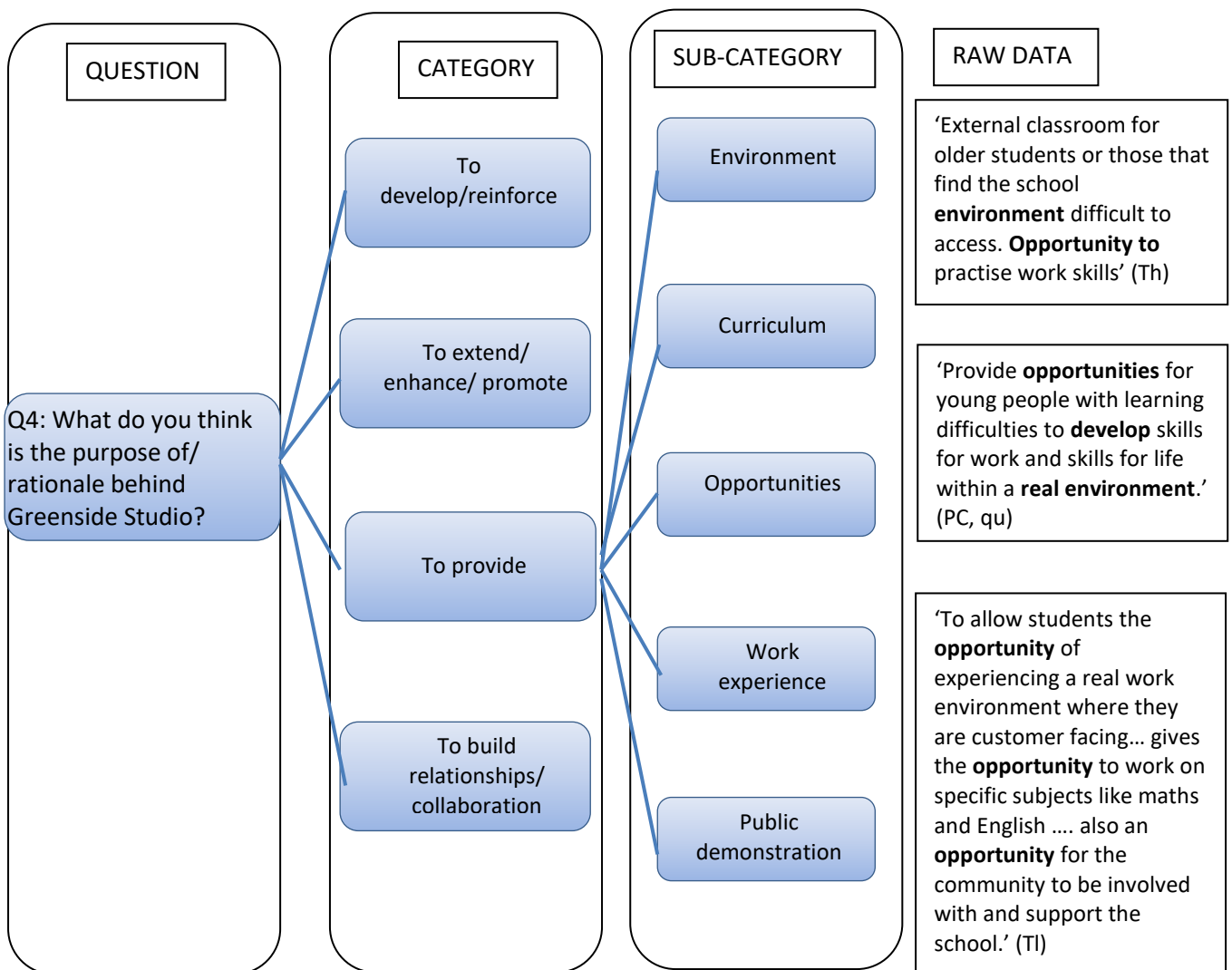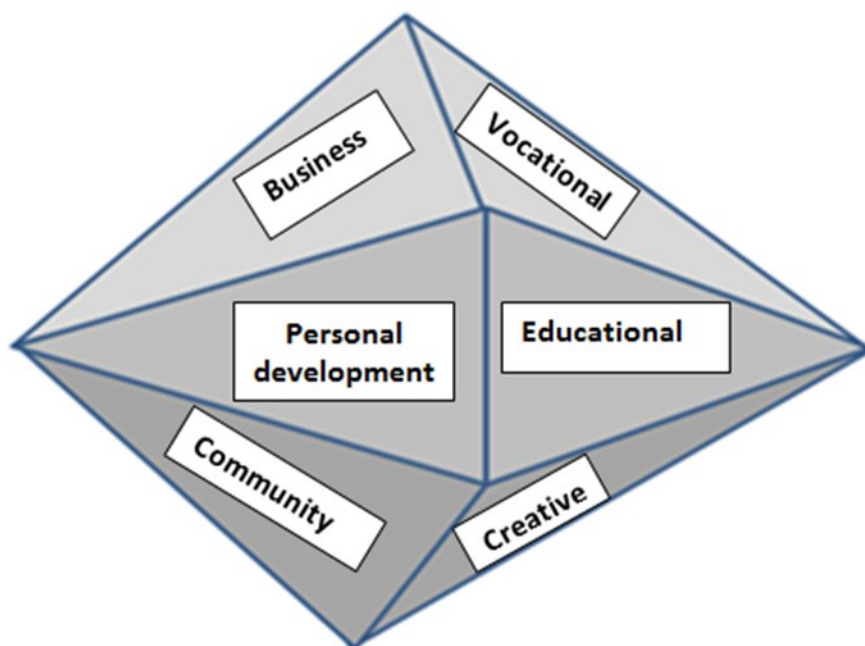
Figure 1: Example of questionnaire coding process

Figure 2

Figure 2: The 'sides' of the Studio