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TITLE:

Access, opportunity and career: supporting the aspirations of disabled students with high-end needs in New Zealand

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Access, opportunity and career: supporting the aspirations of dis/abled students with high-end needs in New Zealand

Abstract

Acting as an entry marker into the adult world, the transition from compulsory schooling is inextricably linked with a change in career status. As such, transition is widely acknowledged to be a significant event in the lives of *all* young people regardless of their dis/abilities. However, many dis/abled students in New Zealand, particularly those with high-end needs, experience many challenges in the construction and enactment of their career. These are often exacerbated by the limited availability of mainstream opportunities and/or the absence of clearly defined employment pathways. In addition, they are less likely to have had access to meaningful workplace experiences whilst at school which would assist them with the decisions they must make, and actions they must take in relation to their futures. In this article I locate the concept of the dis/abled student within a New Zealand context, critically explore the notion of career and consider whether this is a feasible and realistic aspiration for those with high-end needs. Following this, I discuss a case study of a post-secondary transitions scheme in the South Island of New Zealand which was established to meet the aspirations of students with high-end needs. This is used to illustrate how initiatives that seek to address the disjuncture between the desires of this student group, labour market expectations and the requirements of local employers can present both opportunities for change and challenges for inclusion.

Keywords

Aspiration, opportunity, career, progression, work-placement, inclusion

Introduction

Dis/abled students face many challenges in life, not least of which is a need to be well prepared in advance of their transition from compulsory education. This is widely acknowledged to be a significant event for *all* young people regardless of their dis/abilities (Cullen, Lindsay and Dockrell 2009; Dee 2000; Shah 2005). It is a period often characterised by feelings of excitement and (anticipated) freedom, accompanied by uncertainty and enforced change as the ‘security blanket’ of compulsory schooling is removed. Acting as an entry marker into the adult world, transition also signifies a change in career status. From this point on, young people *must* begin to make choices and decisions about the future direction of their career(s), albeit temporal, in relation to whether they remain in education and/or enter the labour market, or pursue other options.

Sanderson (2011) reported that many dis/abled young people express a desire to participate in mainstream society by pursuing aspirations and constructing meaningful careers in the same way as their non-dis/abled peers. This underlines a series of crucial issues, because how dis/abilities are understood (and accommodated) impact on the degree of freedom young people are able to exercise, both, at the point of transition and in the future. Moreover, for those seeking to enter the labour market, research highlights that irrespective of their qualifications dis/abled students are likely to have access to fewer opportunities, and experience challenges which are disproportionate to those not categorised in this way (Cleland and Smith 2010; Knapp et al. 2008; Winn and Hay 2009). Allied to this are concerns with how disabling employment attitudes and practices might be challenged and changed. For dis/abled students with high-end needs the challenges are further exacerbated, in part due to the degree of complexity associated with their impairments (such as language/communication, mobility and/or sensory conditions), but more significantly by the

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extent to which they, as human beings, are accommodated by, included within, and welcomed into, mainstream society. Of particular relevance for this student group is a concern with *how* they will acquire the knowledge, skills, information and *meaningful* experiences that enable them to construct a positive career identity, and assist them to navigate the potential trials and uncertainties ahead.

Challenging terminology and shaking foundations: individual rights and collective responsibilities

The classification ‘high-end’ needs is drawn from the 2010 criteria applied by the Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Scheme (ORRS). Managed by the New Zealand Ministry of Education (MoE), ORRS provided extra funding to support students with ‘significant educational needs’ (MoE 2010, 52). To qualify, each applicant was required to undergo a formal assessment to determine the extent to which they were likely to experience ‘extreme or severe difficulty with learning, hearing, vision, mobility, or language’ (MoE 2010, 52), thus positioning them at the higher end of the impairment spectrum.

The term dis/abled student is also utilised, rather than the commonly used identifying phrase, ‘student with disabilities’, or more esoteric label of ‘student with special needs’. The terminology of the dis/abled student gives greater salience to the ways in which societal barriers, environmental factors, and associated attitudes and prejudices act to dis/able students by failing to account for, accommodate, and respond positively to an individual’s impairment(s) (MacArthur 2009). This moves us away from the notion of the dis/abled student as a heroic individual who must alone carry the burden of their impairments, where their ability to cope (without complaint) acts as a signifier of their degree of courage and (dis)honour in response to their own personal tragedy (Barton 2009). Thus the term dis/abled

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student recognises that though we all possess a degree of individual agency, the disabling state will only become more inclusive when collective social practices (which include embedded discriminatory actions, behaviours and the embodiment of an idealised ‘self’), the physical environment, and the often negative and potentially divisive effects of charitable ‘good intentions’ are transformed.

Employing the language of the dis/abled student as a critical social construct acknowledges that whilst we must *all* learn to live with our imperfections and impairments, radical macro-level change is required if society is ultimately to become fairer, more inclusive and less disabling (Finkelstein 2002). An inclusive society is socially just when individual *and* group differences are embraced, valued, celebrated and accommodated (Griffiths 2003; Irving 2010a; Young 1990). Here dis/ablement takes on a different hue and adopts a less concrete form. Thus, rather than measure the degree of impairment against a normative white, male, and able-bodied stereotype, and judge it in relation to an individual’s productive potential, the dis/abling of students should, in an ideal world, melt away in response to positive social change in which all citizens are valued for *who* they are, and their human contribution.

Although it is important not to lose sight of the need for fundamental social change, responding pragmatically to current realities also has a place (Griffiths, 2003). A prominent example of this is found in the human rights approach that seeks to facilitate change through the provision of legal frameworks that codify and challenge incidences of disability discrimination (Harpur 2012) at the micro-level of the individual who may directly experience injustice (Irving, Sanderson and Sanderson 2011). This is embodied in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (United Nations 2007) which was incorporated into New Zealand legislation in 2008 (United Nations 2011).

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Of particular relevance for those with high-end needs who are considering occupational options is Article 27 which identifies ‘the right of the dis/abled person to engage in paid employment, to seek and gain work in their chosen field, and to be accepted in the labour market and workplace’ (Irving, Sanderson and Sanderson 2011, 118). Notionally, at least, whatever their degree of impairment, dis/abled students in New Zealand should be able to pursue their aspirations, access opportunities, and enact their career(s) free from discrimination (Butler 2011). This creates opportunities for the performance of individual agency, opens up spaces for advocacy, and provides a supportive framework for the development of localised initiatives and individualised solutions.

However, it is important to recognise the limitations of rights-based solutions that are enshrined in law yet bound by convention and compromise, and thus continue to reflect uneven power relationships (Harvey 2005). As a result such solutions may not necessarily produce socially just outcomes. Moreover, if the positive effects of localised approaches are to impact on large-scale social change, connections will need to be made with broader transformative goals which bring into question the inequitable workings of the neoliberal state (Soldatic and Chapman 2010), the negative positioning of those with impairments, and its multiple social intersections (Mertens, Sullivan, and Stace 2011). Remaining aware of the uneven workings of power, knowledge and privilege help to contextualise the way in which language is deployed to neutralise difference. Thus, the gaze is turned onto the socially constructed nature of discourse(s), bringing into question ‘common sense’ explanations (Foucault 1988), and facilitating engagement with underlying economic and political philosophies (Gale and Densmore 2000; Irving 2005), all of which impact on the opportunities and career possibilities that are made available to students with high-end needs.

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Aspiration, opportunity and career: connecting with the desires of dis/abled students

Currently there is a dearth of discussion about how dis/abled students, particularly those with high-end needs, might lay claim to meaningful careers because they tend to be problematised in the mainstream career development literature, excluded from deliberations about the career development process, and are generally positioned at the educational and social margins.

Moreover, when the needs of this group are considered, the focus is often on how *they* might manage with/their impairments in the workplace rather than how they might pursue their aspirations and construct meaningful careers in a less disabling society. Consequently, before taking this discussion further, there is a need to ask whether the pursuit of career can be regarded as a realistic aspiration for students with high-end needs. The answer, I contend, is contingent on how career is conceptualised at a philosophical level, understood within society, given meaning by individuals, and enacted in practice. Thus, it requires deeper critical exploration.

‘Career’ is an essentially contested concept, i.e. there is no one agreed meaning (Harris, 1999), with the ambiguity surrounding it shifting and changing over time. This has resulted in the concept being ill-defined and loosely applied, adding to the confusion about who can lay claim to having, or enacting, a career (Irving 2010a, Richardson 1993). Traditionally career was tied to structured linear pathways within major organisations or professions, and often linked with upwards trajectories. It also ascribed public social status, elevating the standing of some such as those from the professional classes, marginalising others (for example workers engaged in the trades and unskilled jobs), whilst rendering invisible those not directly engaged in paid labour like unpaid carers, homemakers or the ‘unemployed’. Little mention was made of the career positioning of dis/abled people whatever their level of impairment. As the certainties of the past unravel, traditional conceptions appear to be giving

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way. Within a fast-changing, unstable, and globalised labour market ‘progression’ may well be downwards or sideways, as well as upwards. This is accompanied by increasingly insecure employment tenure that lacks longevity. Thus, for many, the ‘new’ career is becoming ever more complex, reflecting realities and status positions that are fluid and unpredictable rather than fixed and known (Irving and Raja 1998; Krumboltz 2009; Pryor and Bright 2011). This is reflected in the post-school transitions of students in New Zealand where imminent decisions tend to supersede, and potentially overshadow, those concerned with distant destinations (Higgins 2002).

Changing times are leading to a re-examination of how career might be understood, alongside a reappraisal of the traditional values attached to it. Consideration is being given to how the concept might become less exclusive, and how career enactment might articulate more closely with the multilayered realities of contemporary life (Richardson 2009). Rather than being ascribed from above, within this emerging paradigm career is seen to be subjectively produced. Engaging in a psychological process of self-making, career functions as an ‘overarching construct that gives meaning to the individual’s life’ (Young and Collin 2000, 5). Constructed in relation to other facets of life, career is formed and shaped by the individual who assigns their own priorities, attaches their own meanings, and narrates their own stories about themselves (Stead and Bakker, 2010) and their life/style. The Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA), for example, drawing on a Canadian model, talked of how career can be understood as: ‘A lifestyle concept . . . Careers are unique to each person and are dynamic: unfolding throughout life. Careers include how persons balance their paid and unpaid work and personal life roles’ (2011, 19). However, it is worth noting the underlying assumption that paid work remains a defining lifestyle feature.

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This fluidity and movement is evident in the New Zealand Guidelines for Career Education and Guidance where the Ministry of Education (MoE 2009) stated: “career’ embraces life roles in the home and the community, leisure activities, learning and work. Work, learning and life, though sometimes distinct, are closely intertwined. *Everyone has a career*’, (6, emphasis added). Accordingly, it is recognised, albeit in a fairly dispassionate way, that an individual’s career encompasses multiple overlapping life roles, reaching beyond, and no longer defined by, occupational labels. However, unlike the Australian version, a critical reading implies that having and enacting a career is not conditional on full (or in fact any) participation in the formal labour market. Hence, in New Zealand at least, the right of dis/abled students with high-end needs to construct meaningful careers, irrespective of their employment status, appears to show some promise.

Lying beneath the surface of this holistic and multifaceted conception lurk other, more restrictive, discourses. These are particularly noticeable within schools where career learning is intertwined with individual responsibility, employability, economic participation, qualifications acquisition and the development of a psychologised ‘known self’, thus delimiting alternative accounts (see Irving 2010a). Within a neo/liberal society such as New Zealand, which reifies economic objectives, embraces the importance of the market (Kelsey 1997), extols the virtue of inequitable rewards on the basis of ‘merit’ (Lauder and Brown 2007), and privileges the individual, these views find a comfortable home. Locating career within such a frame further entrenches the notion that even though an individual may be subject to external influences, they remain the sole author of their own destiny, where the career they construct and life they lead is freely chosen. Such a standpoint disregards the lived realities of many dis/abled people who experience social alienation, are marginalised from community participation, feel a sense of individual isolation (Milner and Kelly 2009),

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and are denied access to meaningful career opportunities regardless of any sense of self-identity.

Stead and Bakker (2010) provided an alternative understanding, contending that career is ‘interpersonally and culturally inscribed rather than psychologically constructed’ (47), thus allowing for the impact of socio-political influences on normative accounts of identity construction and social life. This reflects the complex web of power relationships with/in society that act to (re)construct, (re)circulate and (re)position knowledge(s) and truths (Foucault 1988) through a flow of politically informed discourses. Thus, individuals do not simply position themselves through the career construction process. They are also discursively positioned in relation to the economic and social value that is attributed to/by ‘others’. Within contemporary New Zealand, which is characterised by a fluid social hierarchy saturated with economically derived values, this discursive play continues to position career identity as a marker of who is ‘in’, and who can ‘legitimately’ be left out. For those with high-end needs, who may not be economically active and/or whose productive potential is restricted, linking social worth to economic value may render them as having little to offer; being of limited value at best and a burden on society in the extreme (see Morris 2001). This reductive form of understanding has a deleterious effect on the construction of meaningful careers by overplaying the importance attached to paid employment in relation to a life worth living, and disregards the individual and social well-being that can accrue through non-market work activities (Richardson 2012).

Whilst these issues have been explored in greater depth elsewhere (see Richardson 1993, 2009; Irving 2005; 2010a), this brief discussion illuminates the ways in which discursive boundaries are constructed around who ‘we’ are and might become, impacting on the

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development of any sense of individual identity, collective responsibility or social belonging. Moreover, what is resoundingly clear are how dominant career discourses systemically marginalise dis/abled people by privileging economic participation. Thus, there is a need to reposition the career discourse by accepting paid employment as a partial referent which should not be applied as a measure of individual and social worth. For those with high-end needs in particular, whose economic and productive potential may be mediated by their impairments, and, by association, impact on their standing within a market-led society, this is of considerable importance. Challenging embedded (and often negative) social and political views that may be held about the ability of students with high-end needs to cope with/in mainstream society in general, and the labour market in particular, requires new ways of thinking. (Re)claiming and (re)writing the language of career by actively exploiting the spaces that allow for the promotion of a holistic model, through educative processes, political engagement and social action, opens up possibilities for the insertion of inclusive discourses that are sensitive to difference, meaningful for students, and transformative in practice (Irving 2010b). This may help to (re)position ‘career’ and ameliorate the process of transition by extending the underlying values of inclusive education into the wider community.

Developing meaningful futures: an illustration from the South

Advocating for a fairer and more just society in which all citizens have opportunities to develop meaningful careers irrespective of their impairments requires us to work within, yet at the same time transgress, the everyday realities of the world ‘as it is’ (Griffiths 2003), to make real ‘the language of the possible’ (Freire 2004, 70). In a society such as New Zealand that symbolically bestows ‘good’ citizenship on the basis of economic participation, this also imparts a sense of social legitimacy. Therefore, whilst accepting that there is a need to extend the career discourse beyond that of the labour market, it is also important to acknowledge that

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many students with high-end needs *desire* real jobs and wish to participate in the labour market as equals alongside their non-disabled peers. For this to become a reality it will be necessary to push the normative boundaries that impose restrictions on who can be in/excluded. Instigating initiatives that enable students with high-end needs to acquire occupational insight, engage actively with, *and* be visible within mainstream society is one means of achieving this and is discussed further in the case study below reported by Irving, Sanderson and Sanderson (2011).

Experiencing the ‘real world’: rebalancing resources, refocusing opportunities

The post-secondary transitions scheme was funded through the MoE and located in a mainstream school in a small provincial city on the South Island of New Zealand. To be eligible students needed to meet the ORRS criteria. Whilst it could be argued that the ORRS model is not ideal because it reinforces a deficit discourse by focusing on potential limitations (Rutherford 2011), it does acknowledge that an unequal redistribution of resources is required if the ‘unique needs’ of some students are to be met (Brantlinger 2004, 18). The challenge is to ensure that the ‘high-end’ label attached to the funding (and by association to the student) does not overshadow their access to opportunities by shifting the focus away from their potential.

As identified earlier, for many students the transition from compulsory schooling signals an adjustment in status from childhood to (emerging) adulthood, a shift from enforced schooling to ‘forced choice’ with regards to education, training or (un)employment options, and signifies the end of a period of relative dependency to one of increased social expectation, individual obligation and, for some, personal autonomy. Beresford (2004) maintained that transition initiatives for dis/abled young people should ‘enable and support [them] towards

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and onto a new life stage . . . with the young person's preferences, goals and aspirations taking centre stage' (584-585). The post-secondary transitions scheme reflected these sentiments by seeking to surmount those obdurate boundaries that serve to divide populations on the basis of their dis/abilities. The coordinator played a key role, acting as administrator, facilitator, career coach, and advocate. Hence, the focus was on each individual student's potential rather than possible limitations. Thus, the scheme sought to enhance personal development, extend experiences, and positively inform each student's decisions about potential post-school options and opportunities. Instead of bringing an expert gaze to bear, the coordinator engaged in a communicative process that enabled the views of the student and their parents/caregivers to be heard and respected (Young, 2000).

To achieve this, the coordinator met each of the potential participants and their families/caregivers to discuss what the scheme could offer and explain how it worked. Potential limitations were also explored to determine whether they felt the scheme would meet their immediate and long-term needs. Through this process, a sense of openness, trust, mutuality, shared commitment and ownership was established. This communication was integral, ongoing and continued through to the point of actual transition when a community forum was arranged that enabled parents/caregivers to become aware of the support services that were available, and explore possible post-school options, thus facilitating choices that were also informed by lived experiences (Irving, Sanderson and Sanderson 2011).

Dis/abled student at work: possibilities and problems

Whilst a range of placements were offered, within the context of this article the work-placement dimension of the scheme is particularly relevant. From their research into the transition of dis/abled graduates, Piggott and Houghton (2007) found that being unable to

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gain access to work experience was likely to further disadvantage this group in the competition for jobs. The importance attached to access to *real* opportunities was also reported by Nind and Seale (2009), who explored barriers to employment for people with learning difficulties. The consensual view expressed by their participants was that access ‘is about taking control of our lives, being allowed to take risks, having awareness of rights and responsibilities, learning skills, developing lasting, mutual relationships, having opportunities to earn money’ (283). Access to work-placements that connect with a student’s stated aspirations allows them to assert their independence, build capabilities and demonstrate their abilities. Moreover, such experiences can contribute to the employability *and* social development of students and might also result in the opening up of opportunities as employers, themselves, become exposed to the ‘realities’ of (dis)ability and the positive contribution they can make (Irving, Sanderson and Sanderson 2011).

Being aware of the many misconceptions that circulate about the capabilities of students with high-end needs, the coordinator sought to recruit employers who were committed to providing meaningful and worthwhile opportunities, and offered work-placements that were commensurate with the interests identified by the students. The coordinator tended to begin the recruitment process through ‘cold calling’, following this up with further phone calls and/or visits as appropriate. In this provincial city, which is rurally situated, has a preponderance of small employers and is characterised by its sense of community, recruitment appeared to be less problematic than it might have been in a bigger, more ‘impersonal’ environment.

Irving, Sanderson and Sanderson (2011) pointed out that those employers who participated did not provide placements simply on a philanthropic basis. A reciprocal relationship was

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expected, i.e. the opportunity for students to gain experience in exchange for task performance. This was not left to an employer's idiosyncratic whims but established as part of a negotiated agreement between the coordinator, employer and student. The productive tasks identified, and the ability of the student to perform these, were reviewed and evaluated on a regular basis by the coordinator through on-site visits, and discussions with the student, employer and (when applicable) the teacher aide who may have been providing individual support to the student.

Yet I believe there is scope to extend this approach further through direct engagement with Chambers of Commerce, or charitable organisations like the Lions and Rotary which have a preponderance of employers and managers. Delivering talks or workshops to such groups can help to build rapport, dispel preconceived notions about dis/ability, extend opportunities and contribute to the identification of support strategies that might be employed. This could result in the promotion of positive attitudes towards the placement, and employment, of dis/abled students by highlighting the potential economic *and* social benefits that can accrue. Involving employers with positive experiences of the scheme would also help legitimate the practice and add to the authenticity of the arguments.

Hence, the post-secondary transitions scheme generated opportunities to focus on the multiple ways in which students with high-end needs might develop and exercise their capabilities to the best of their abilities (Cleland and Smith, 2010) and demonstrate their talents. In addition, it no longer positioned them as 'special', yet did not underplay the fact that they may be 'different' in some respects and require a working environment that is conducive to their needs. Moreover, it helped to establish the right of those with high-end needs to be visible and active participants within a society that often excludes on the basis of

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ignorance and/or emotive irrationality. However, the paradoxical nature of the employment relationship, and the complex ways in which disability is positioned and ‘normalised’ within the labour market, is encapsulated in the views expressed by one employer who operated a ‘quota’ which restricted the number of dis/abled students whom they would accept on placement, and ultimately the number of dis/abled people whom they were willing to employ (Irving, Sanderson and Sanderson 2011). Yet no quotas are legislated for in New Zealand. Thus, informal processes were at work which sought to legitimate exclusionary actions and hide discriminatory practice.

Therefore, if dis/abled students are to engage with/in the labour market in meaningful ways this may require all concerned ‘to reconceptualise the notion of disability to one of individuals with ability and the contribution all people can make to the workplace’ (Winn and Hay 2009, 103), looking beyond simplistic notions of employability (Van Hal et al. 2012) and employment. Yet employers are not necessarily educators. Consequently those involved with the delivery of the scheme may have to work more closely with them (and possibly their employees) to ensure they are adequately prepared to manage a diverse workforce, and provide the support required (Piggott and Houghton 2007) to facilitate a meaningful student experience. Different ways of thinking about traditional employment patterns and practices will also need revisiting for change to be effected, and for any available employment subsidies to be fully utilised. For example, these might include making physical changes to the working environment, developing ‘new ways’ to communicate, learning to understand yet look beyond an individual’s impairment, and/or adopting flexible working hours and workplace practices.

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However, this, in itself, creates a new set of challenges. For example, strategies that actively challenge the perceptions and attitudes of employers (and the wider community) towards dis/ability, and promote alternative ways of working, are unlikely to appear in the syllabus of many teacher training programmes. Nor are there electives specifically concerned with career *education* for trainee or qualified New Zealand secondary-school teachers (Irving, 2011), let alone the development and delivery of work-based learning. Moreover, Irving, Sanderson and Sanderson (2011) noted that whilst teacher aides provided workplace support, when required, not all were comfortable with this task. This should come as no surprise because it does not reflect their traditional role, nor are they likely to have received training in this area. In fact, as Rutherford (2011) identified, the only requirement to become a teacher aide in New Zealand is a satisfactory police check. Furthermore, time constraints, can also impact on the effectiveness of those engaged in such programmes to work creatively and engage with the community in a more general sense. In the post-transitions scheme, for instance, the coordinator worked well beyond the 10 hours allocated for its management and delivery simply to meet the direct needs of the individual students. Finally, the reliance on annual funding (which is not guaranteed) does little to aid continuity, contribute to long-term planning, facilitate staff development, or enhance community links.

Looking ahead: beyond the dis/abling discourses of the market

As discussed, workplace learning presents opportunities for students with high-end needs to connect with the labour market, can lead to increased acceptance by employers (and others within the community), and may help such students avoid capture by solutions which result in some 'becoming ghettoised within disability settings' (Milner and Kelly 2009, 59). This case study demonstrated many possibilities in relation to how dis/abled students with high-end needs might access and actively engage in mainstream activities that stretch beyond the

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school or 'sheltered' placements. Enabling students with high-end needs to gain experiences in different occupational settings presented them with spaces to test out their ideas and try out possibilities that build on their interests (Dee, 2000). By embracing difference the post-secondary transitions scheme promoted an affirmative approach towards diversity that can lead to a sophisticated understanding of inclusion in which difference is welcomed and valued rather than grudgingly accepted (Soresi, Nota, and Wehmeyer 2011) by all sections of the community. In many respects this also enabled the students to actively engage in the production and construction of their, albeit fluid and complex, career identity. Visibly confronting preconceived notions about the ability of dis/abled students to 'fit' into the workplace (Piggott, Sapey and Wilenius 2005; Shier, Graham and Jones 2009) will potentially lead to enhanced social acceptance and inclusion on *their* terms, and help challenge the disabling discourses that circulate within mainstream society in general, and the labour market more specifically.

Although still in its infancy, Irving, Sanderson and Sanderson (2011) reported that the transitions scheme can lay claim to some success. Since its inception, two years ago, 27 students had joined the scheme, and 20 still remained. Of the seven that had left, three entered paid employment brokered by the coordinator; two gained paid employment which reflected the skills they had developed; one enrolled on a tertiary education course; and one joined a post-secondary transition provider. Whilst celebrating the scheme's success, it is important to sound a note of caution. Whereas the focus of the discussion has rested on the role of work-placements in developing the strengths, capabilities and self-esteem of students with high-end needs, initiatives of this kind are not a panacea for structural unemployment or under-employment that impacts differentially on the opportunities of all. This needs to be taken into account when determining its effectiveness. Whilst enhanced employability skills

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and employment outcomes might be desirable for some participants, it would be more efficacious to assess the value of such projects in relation to a student's overall personal and social development. There is also scope to consider whether the perceptions of employers have also changed with regards to dis/abled students as a result of the scheme.

Thus, a reflexive approach is required that facilitates a deeper understanding of how careers might be constructed in a holistic and multilayered sense, enacted in meaningful ways whether in paid employment or otherwise, and understood as social products that are not solely of our own making. Furthermore, despite the fact that legislation provides some protection against discrimination, it currently presents a limited challenge to dominant economic discourses that put profit and production before the well-being of people.

Therefore, it is imperative to ensure that the learning gained within an work-placement context is located within a broader socio-political framework that looks critically at, and reaches beyond, economic goals by making students, and members of the wider community (including employers), aware of these wider challenges to inclusion and how they might engage in the change process.

Conclusion

Within New Zealand's neo/liberal society, economic imperatives concerned with the need to secure profitability and enhance productivity, remain a priority for the state. Meanwhile, developing employability skills and the inculcation of positive attitudes towards qualifications and the labour market dominates the thinking of many career practitioners, and is considered essential for/by young dis/abled people who have been caught up in these discourses. This is of little surprise when individual worth continues to be associated with material values, when social inclusion is conflated with economic participation, when career

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identity remains intertwined with occupation, and when qualifications are positioned as a passport to employment success. Therefore, it is important to ensure that those working for, with, and alongside dis/abled students, including those who provide work-placements, learn to look beyond these delimiting discourses which present a partial worldview.

Though work-placement can play an important role in helping *all* dis/abled students to envisage different, diverse and, ideally, positive futures, it needs to be located within a holistic philosophy through which it contributes to a sense of personal growth, collective responsibility, social belonging and political insight. By acknowledging that economic participation and productive potential are misleading signifiers of inclusion and ‘success’, a space is created which allows for the insertion of a holistic understanding which accommodates multiple ways of being. Moreover, the extension of a holistic learning philosophy can contribute to a socially inclusive society in which responsibility and a sense of moral obligation are shared as employers and members of the wider polity interact with, listen to, and learn from, the resilience and enthusiasm that many dis/abled students display. Within a socially just and compassionate society, inclusion would be positively facilitated, and diversity welcomed and valued (Gale and Densmore, 2000; Young 1990). Recognition would thus be given to the ways in which the range of abilities, skills, talents and attributes, which we *all* bring with us, can contribute to collective well-being and add to the rich tapestry of social life. Remaining aware of how small gains might change societal perspectives helps to avoid the slide into a process of pragmatic reductionism in which current ‘realities’ are positioned as inviolable and possible alternative scenarios become lost.

Many dis/abled students desire the opportunity to participate fully in mainstream society, to live their lives on equal terms with their non-dis/abled peers, and to be valued for themselves,

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with all of their human attributes and failings. Transition programmes that do not position dis/abled students as ‘special’ or engage in patronising practices (Irving, Sanderson and Sanderson 2011) can make a positive contribution towards this goal. Working within the contemporary realities of New Zealand society, in which choice is constricted and opportunity constrained, and despite its current limitations, this scheme goes some way towards enabling students with high-end needs to construct positive career identities in a dynamic sense, whether or not they secure employment, and takes one small step forward in the struggle for an inclusive educational system, *and* society.

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