

Outcomes for young people with SEBD leaving specialist school

Report on Past Students 2010 – 2014

Introduction

Transition into adulthood is always challenging, but particularly so for young people with disabilities, including social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). However, whilst bleak post-school outcomes for students with SEBD in the US are well documented, demonstrating low employment rates, less financial independence and limited interpersonal relationships than typically developing peers, investigations into the post-school outcomes for youngsters with SEBD are still limited in the UK. This study aimed to examine a sample of young people aged 18-23 who attended a specialist school in the south east of England for pupils with SEBD between 2010 and 2014 to see how they have adapted to the demands of life by examining their academic, employment and social outcomes. In line with Carroll and Dockrell (2010) who carried out a similar study looking at post-16 outcomes for young adults with specific language impairment (SLI) leaving special school, by focusing on one specific school this study will provide a homogenous group with regards to educational and therapy provision from which to research and examine findings.

Rationale for study

A key indicator of the success of any school can be judged by the long-term outcomes for their pupils when they become adults (Farrell & Humphrey, 2009). If pupils manage to live as independent, well-adjusted adults and are integrated within their local community, then the school could be viewed as being successful in helping their pupils to become fully included into society. UK Government statistics report that in 2010, 45% of young people at age 19 were still in education, 37% were in employment, 4% were in Government Supported Training (GST) such as Apprenticeships, and 14% were Not in Education, Employment and Training (NEET) (DfES, 2011). This compares with 24% of young people with Special Education Needs (SEN) who remained in education post-16, 50% who were in employment (predominantly jobs without training), and 27% who were classified as NEET (Aston,

Dewson, Loukas & Dyson, 2005). More recently, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2011) reported that pupils with statements of SEN are around four times less likely to be in higher education by age 19 compared to those with no special education needs, and in 2010/2011 only 6% of statemented youngsters progressed to higher education by age 19.

In addition to this, longitudinal studies have shown that post-school outcomes for students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) have been historically bleak. SEBD is an umbrella term used to describe a range of complex and chronic difficulties experienced by many children and young people and covers a wide range of special education needs. This includes children and young people with conduct disorders/hyperkinetic disorders, including oppositional defiance disorder (ODD), attention deficit disorder/attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD), and also children and young people whose behavioural difficulties may be less obvious, such as those with anxiety, who self-harm, have school phobia or depression. It also includes those with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) who have social communication difficulties, and those whose behaviour or emotional wellbeing are seen to be deteriorating. Also known as BESD or EBD, recent English government figures suggest that around 150,000 children in mainstream and special schools are affected by SEBD.

Research from the US (e.g. Wagner et. al., 2005) indicates that young adults with SEBD have poorer social skills, lower academic achievement, and higher incidences of psychiatric conditions, compared to their peers without SEBD. These characteristics have been linked to lower graduation rates, limited post-secondary participation, less financial independence and limited interpersonal relationships. This group also has the lowest employment rates and experienced longer delays in obtaining employment after leaving school compared to their peers with and without special needs. They also frequently quit jobs that were not to their liking.

In contrast to the US, relatively few studies have focussed on transition outcomes of pupils with SEBD in the UK, although findings indicate similar conclusions. Polat and Farrell (2002), for example, found in a sample of former pupils from a residential special school for youngsters with EBD that very few were in regular employment and living independently. Furthermore, over 50% still experienced difficulties in

forming relationships and a number had been arrested for committing petty crimes. However, more research is needed in this area to establish whether, with the right provision, outcomes are now more favourable for adolescents with SEBD leaving special school, and if not, to provide an insight into how this can be addressed in the future.

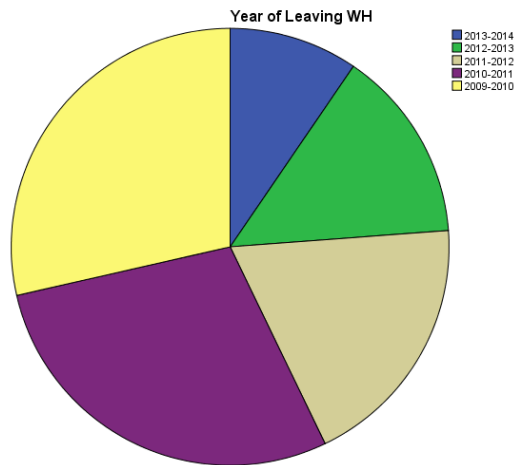
Methodology

All participants had a statement of SEN and had attended West Heath as a student, leaving at some time between 2010 and 2014. They were informed that their responses would be treated confidentially, and that the object of the study was partially to track their progress and partially to improve provision for current students.

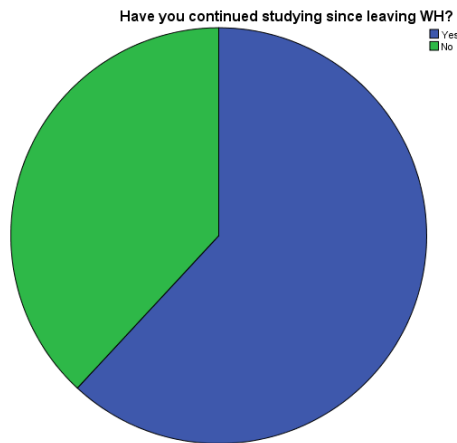
In May 2015, questionnaires were posted out to 132 past students. A stamped, self-addressed envelope was included to encourage participation. However, only 21 questionnaires (15.9%) were returned which was disappointingly low, and it must be remembered therefore that the results below cannot be generalised to all our leavers. Nonetheless, of these 10 agreed to a fuller telephone interview which was subsequently carried out between June and August 2015. Data from the postal questionnaire were analysed quantitatively using SPSS, whereas a thematic analysis was conducted on the 10 telephone interviews.

1) Results from the postal questionnaire

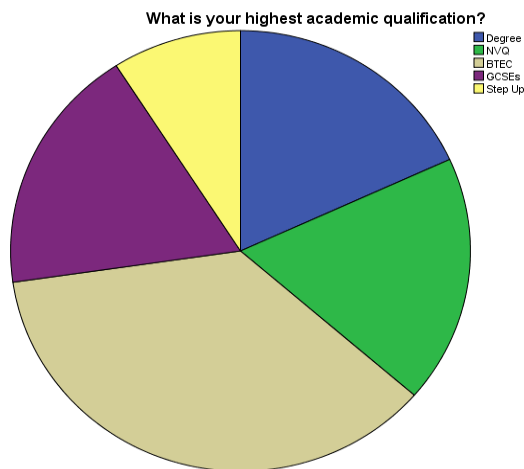
Q1: What year did you leave West Heath?



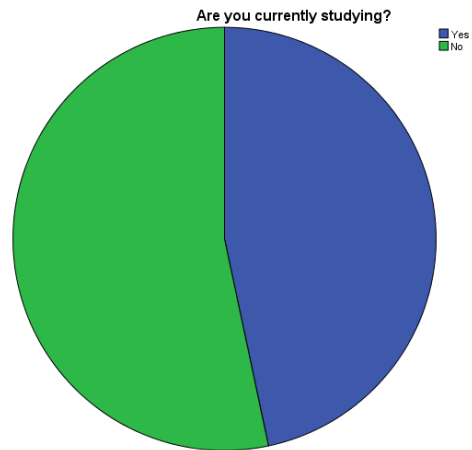
Q2 Since leaving West Heath have you continued studying? Yes: 61.9%; No: 38.1%



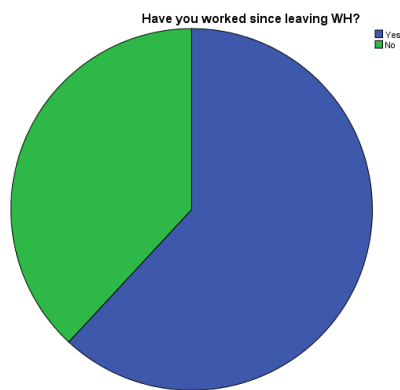
Q3 If yes, what is the highest qualification you have reached?



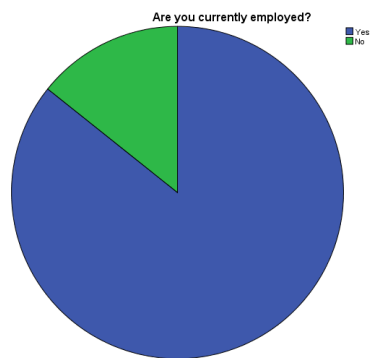
Q4 If yes, are you currently studying? Yes: 46.7%; No: 53.3%



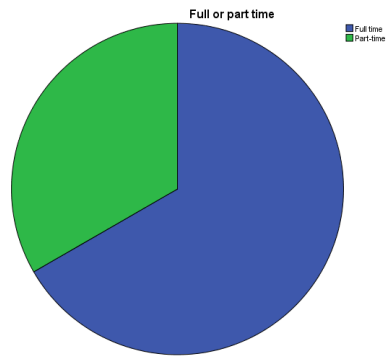
Q5 Since leaving West Heath have you had a job? Yes: 61.9%; No: 38.1%



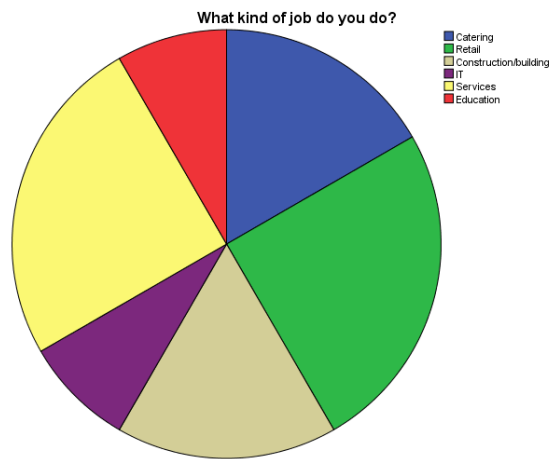
Q6 If yes, are you currently employed? Yes: 85.7%; No: 14.3%



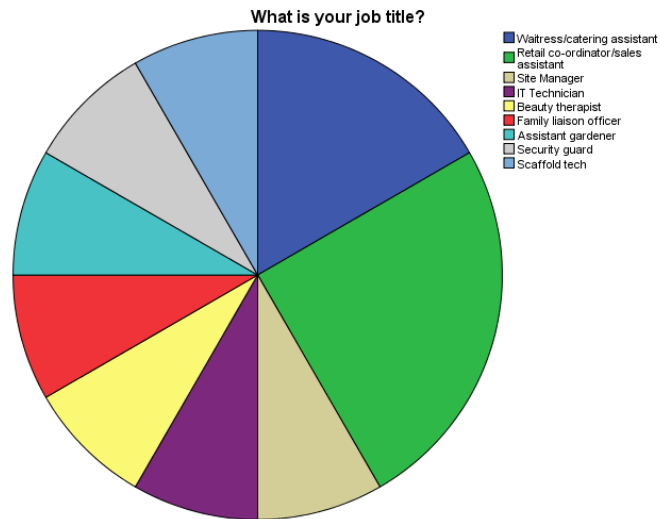
Q7 If yes, is this full-time or part-time? Yes: 66.7%; No: 33.3%



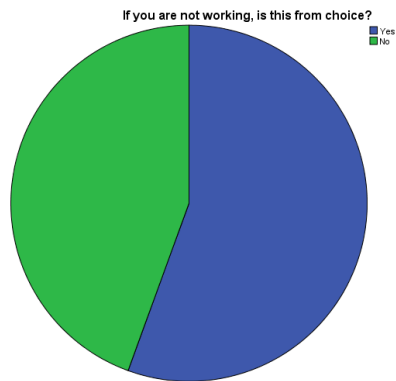
Q8 If yes, what kind of job do you work in?



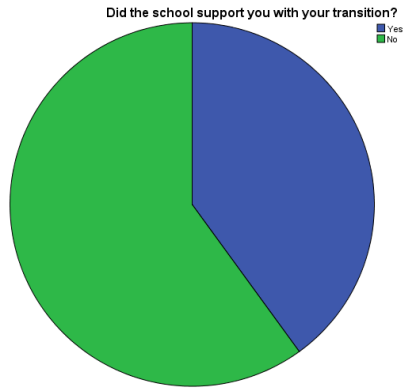
Q9 What is your job title?



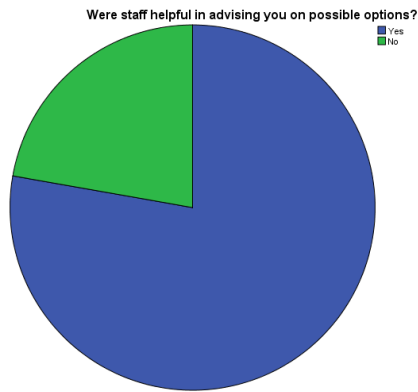
Q10 If you are not currently working, is this from choice? Yes: 55.6%; No: 44.4%



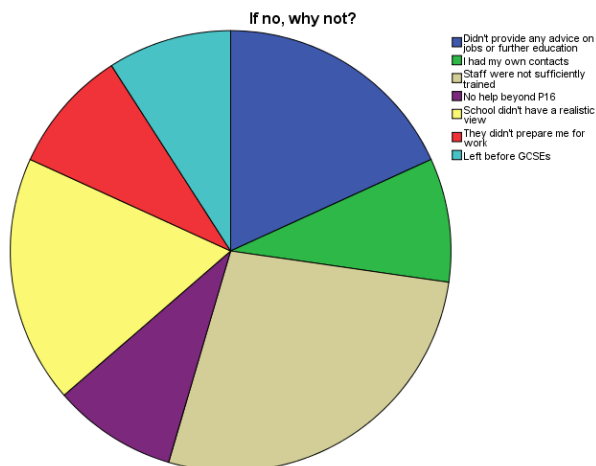
Q11 Do you feel that you were supported with your transition from school? Yes: 40%; No: 60%



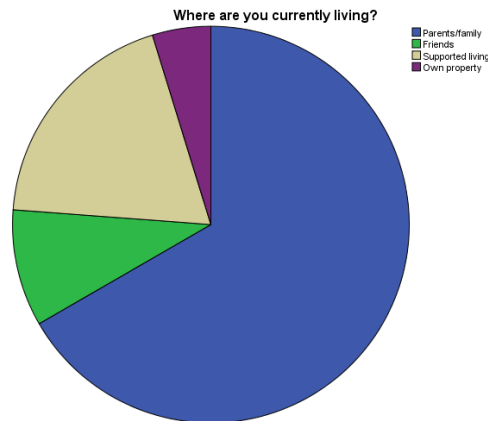
Q12 If yes, were staff helpful in advising you on possible options? Yes: 77.8%; No: 22.2%



Q13 If no, why not?



Q14 Where are you currently living?



Discussion

From this very small sample, the results are actually quite encouraging. Nearly 62% of respondents have continued studying after leaving West Heath, and approximately 47% of these are currently still studying. Nearly 73% of those who have continued studying have achieved either a degree, NVQs or BTECs. With regards to employment, approximately 62% have had jobs since leaving West Heath, and of these nearly 86% are currently employed, with 67% in full-time employment. Sectors employed in included catering, retail, construction, IT and education. Of the participants not currently working, nearly 56% stated this was from choice rather than because they were unable to find employment.

Disappointingly, however, only 40% of respondents felt they received adequate support from school with their transition, but of these 78% felt that staff were helpful. The 60% who stated that they did not receive adequate support gave a variety of reasons, for example: staff were not adequately trained, or the school didn't have a realistic view of their abilities.

2) Results from the telephone interview

10 participants agreed to have an in-depth telephone conversation regarding their experiences since leaving West Heath. Conversations lasted between 10 and 45 minutes and were conducted at a time to suit the participant, mainly evenings. Five themes that were focused on: Social and leisure activities; Support with transition from school; Education/training attainment since leaving West Heath; Employment status; and Independence and views on progress made since leaving West Heath.

Theme 1: Social and Leisure Activities

Interestingly, 20% of the sample claimed they were too busy either working or studying to have time for any hobbies. However, of the 80% who do have a hobby, the majority cited 'chilling with friends' as their main way of spending leisure time, with the remainder listing flying, travelling, bird-watching and motor-bikes.

Disappointingly, only 40% play some kind of sport, with football being the main area of interest. The majority of participants (70%) spend most of their leisure time with friends, and over 60% have found it easy to make new friends and to take part in leisure activities.

Theme 2: Support with transition from school

50% of respondents entered Post-16 whilst the remainder left after Year 11; 60% left with GCSEs with the others either leaving with a BTEC or no qualifications at all. Of the 70% that met with a Connexions/CFX adviser only 43% found it a useful experience, and no respondent made a decision based on advice given. When asked why they felt it hadn't been helpful, answers included "aspirations were too low"; "they didn't tell me anything I didn't already know"; "my parents/contacts were much more helpful"; "they had a false sense of reality"; and "promises were made but not kept". When asked what more the school could have done to support transition, answers included "help with writing CVs"; "provide life skills in P16"; "be more pro-active in helping with applications to college"; "be more efficient"; "provide experience days to help make decisions"; "help with interviews more"; "involve parents more"; "too much molly-coddling"; "provide more work experience"; and "too much focus on achievements and not enough focus on the future". However, one

respondent did comment that “you never appreciate the help until you no longer have it!”

Theme 3: Education/Training Attainment since leaving West Heath

A large majority (83%) of respondents still studying said they are enjoying their course citing “interesting topic”; and “I enjoy learning new things” as the reasons. Parents and teachers were the main influences on choosing specific courses, and most found it “quite easy” to start the course, although a few found it “very hard without support”. A minority intend to continue studying with the intention of getting a qualification (e.g. as an engineer or a lawyer), but none were completely confident that it would lead to employment.

Theme 4: Employment Status

Although the majority of respondents are currently working, either full or part-time, most positions currently held do not require qualifications, although all required a completed application form and an interview. All enjoy their jobs with reasons cited being “the people”; “it’s interesting”; “it pays well”; and “I enjoy selling”. When asked the most helpful source of support when looking and applying for jobs, the most frequent responses were the internet and personal contacts.

Theme 5: Independence and views on progress made since leaving West Heath

90% of respondents said they feel more independent since they left West Heath, with 80% also feeling more confident. Reasons cited for this include “working” and “maturity”. 60% have passed their driving test, and 40% currently have a regular partner. When asked about the future, 80% said they feel hopeful, citing their next goal as “travelling”; “finishing their degree”; “setting up their own business”; “getting promotion”; “getting a full-time job”; and “getting their own apartment”. Furthermore, when asked what they saw themselves doing in five years’ time, the majority either saw themselves working in their chosen field, or continuing to study.

Conclusions

Based on previous research, it appears that the students who responded to this study are doing considerably better than the national average for youngsters with

SEN. In comparison with Aston et al. (2005) who reported that only 24% of their sample of stated youngsters were in education, 50% in employment, and 27% NEET, this study shows that 62% of the postal questionnaire sample have continued studying, a further 62% have been, or are currently, in employment, and only 14.25% are NEET. Surprisingly, this also compares extremely favourably with the UK government figures which reported that only 45% of youngsters generally aged 19 were in education, 37% in employment and 14% NEET (DfES, 2011). Furthermore, from the in-depth telephone interview it appears that the majority of this sample feel confident, independent, optimistic about the future, and have long-term goals. They also have no difficulty making new friends, have found it easy to take part in leisure activities, are capable of sustaining a regular partnership, and appear not to have had any difficulty securing employment.

However, despite these positive findings, there is evidence to suggest that there is still room for improvement. Some students' clearly feel they were not properly supported with their transition from school, and certainly it appears that very few felt the benefits of meeting with a Connexions/CFX adviser. Hopefully this has already been addressed since these particular students have left, but other comments such as "provide experience days to help make decisions" and "provide more work experience" should perhaps be considered for feasibility. It should be remembered that many of our students are on the autistic spectrum and therefore if they cannot 'picture' something then they cannot make an informed decision. Perhaps some kind of careers fair could be held at the school in the future?

Whilst this study has been an interesting insight into the outcomes of some of our past students, it is not without its limitations. Most notable is the extremely small sample, which may mean that the results are skewed towards the more successful and motivated students. It is noteworthy that a higher percentage of responses came from leavers in 2010 and 2011 – perhaps this was because they had had longer to establish themselves and are thus more successful? However, it may just mean that our address list was not accurate and that the questionnaires never reached the intended recipient. It was interesting that 67% of the respondents still lived at home with their families, which may explain the higher return rate. It is also noteworthy that

all the students who agreed to a telephone interview were students that knew the researcher well, and were thus perhaps more prepared to help.

If this study is repeated in the future, it is essential that we obtain email addresses for all our leavers so that questionnaires can be sent out on-line. Not only will this have the benefit of saving costs, but will hopefully also result in a higher response rate. It may also be interesting to instigate a school reunion for past students at some stage? The majority that were spoken to by telephone expressed an interest in news of staff and other developments at West Heath, and it may have the added benefit of providing inspiration/motivation to current students.

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