

# ***The Big Plan: A Good Life After School***

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## *Table of Contents*

<b>Prologue (the bit at the beginning)</b>	
<b>Scene 1 A football stadium in north-east England</b>	6
<b>Scene 2 A football stadium in central Scotland</b>	8
<b>Why We Wrote This</b>	9
<b>Where the Idea Came From</b>	11
<b>Getting Going: How We Set Things Up</b>	20
<b>Coordination</b>	
Who does it?	21
Recruitment and publicity	23
Pulling together a team	25
Setting up the venue	27
Ongoing support to families	29
<b>Facilitation</b>	
Ethos and values	31
Creating the right environment	33
A funny kind of group	35
<b>Team Work</b>	
The family group facilitators	37
<b>What We Did</b>	
Setting the scene and getting to know each other	42
Example exercises	45
What we learned in Session 1	47

<b>Session Two: Thinking about dreams for the future</b>	48
Example exercise	50
What we learned from session 2	51
<b>Session Three: Thinking about your gifts and strengths</b>	52
Example exercises	54
What we learned from session 3	56
<b>Session Four: Thinking about community</b>	58
Example exercises	61
What we learned from session 4	63
<b>Session Five: Pulling it all together</b>	64
Example exercises	66
What we learned from Session 5	68
<b>What People Said About It</b>	69
Timing of the sessions	79
Themes are evident in the feedback	82
<b>What We Are Learning</b>	
Young people taking centre stage	83
It is for everyone!	85
Working with the tension	
“Who makes the decisions - really?”	87
Hope, optimism and self-belief: big outcomes but hard to measure	89
Building your team’s capacity	95
“It’s person centred planning Jim, but not as we know it!”	97
<b>Epilogue</b>	99
<b>Further Reading</b>	103

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

At the risk of making an embarrassing Oscar-style acceptance speech, we did think it was important to acknowledge the support and contribution which lots of people have made to the production of this little book.

Firstly, of course we would like to thank all the young people, families and other participants of the groups in Edinburgh, Redcar and Cleveland, and more recently, Newcastle and Dumfries and Galloway, without whom this would not have been possible. Heather would particularly like to thank Derek Birtwhistle whose creativity and vision made the first Big Plan a reality.

Steve would like to thank Edinburgh Development Group for giving him the practical and moral support to write this book and we are both very grateful to Brenda Hepburn of EDG for the use of her lovely graphics. Thanks are also due to Sylvia Crick and Helen Wilson for their generous and helpful comments on earlier drafts of the work and to Jack Pearpoint for his tireless endeavour in editing the book for us.

As always, we appreciate the inspiration and encouragement which Connie Lyle O'Brien, Beth Mount and all at Job Path have given us to give a good idea a go.

Finally, we would like to dedicate this book to two people recently departed; who we know would have been delighted to see their daughter and son still following their dreams in life, long after school – Frank Simmons and Patricia Coulson

### ***Steve and Heather***



Brenda Hepburn of EDG - graphics.

## PROLOGUE

### (THE BIT AT THE BEGINNING)

#### Scene 1

#### A football stadium in north-east England

At the first coffee break of the second session of The Big Plan, Heather was glad to grab a seat and chat to the folks gathered around the table. All around the room the crisply starched white covers were littered with what would become the tools of the trade of the Big Plan; sweetie wrappers, lollipop sticks, coffee cups, flipchart paper and pens. The room was buzzing nicely and people seemed enthusiastic. One or two were skeptical about how it might work for them or for their son or daughter but there were so few other possibilities around they thought that they might as well give it a go and anyway it was quite good fun and lunch had been great so, why not?

In the middle of all the noise and bustle one of the facilitators said quietly to Heather, "Rachael and her Mam were wondering if they should tell you something...Rachael's got her own flat!"

It had seemed a good idea at the time...bring a bunch of young people together with their families and plan with them in a way that generated some answers to our question:

"What would it take for this young man or woman to have an interesting and fulfilling life where they could meet



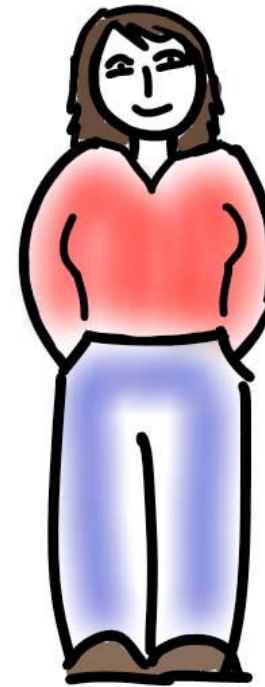
people who would become their friends and make their contribution to their local community?"

In the weeks between the introductory session and the start of the The Big Plan Heather had started to waiver a bit...of course it had worked in America, things always work there. And anyway, what wouldn't work if Beth Mount and Connie Lyle O'Brien were involved? The good idea she and Steve had come up with started to scare Heather and she thought, "Maybe we shouldn't expect too much... maybe a couple of work placements, some clearer ideas about the kind of life people wanted to live and what they wanted to do when they left school...nothing big...nothing unrealistic...no setting people up to fail...no guarantees about what would come out of the process but lots of encouragement to hang on and see what would happen. We could do that..."

By the time things got started real jobs and flats were beyond her wildest dreams but here were Rachael and her Mam saying that the introductory session with its talk of dreams and possibilities had started them thinking. Rachael's dream had been to live in her own place with the Middlesbrough Football team but then the flat across the road became vacant and they wondered "Could Rachael rent it?" Then they made a few phone calls and Derek wrote them a letter and the next thing is that they're down at the Council signing the lease and RACHAEL HAS HER OWN FLAT...AND RACHAEL AND HER MAM WERE WONDER-

ING IF THEY SHOULD TELL YOU...

So Rachael and her Mam took the microphone and told everyone in the room about what happens when you consider your dreams and started us thinking about how extraordinary things can happen in completely ordinary ways...



## Scene 2

### A football stadium in central Scotland

It was the fifth and final session of A Good Life After School. Everyone arrived at the Hibs Stadium with a mixture of anticipation, excitement and a tinge of sadness that this would be our last meeting. After 5 months of working together planning for life after school, the programme was drawing to a close.

Hing-Yip came striding into the room, flanked by his parents, with his trademark broad smile and an excited laugh. He marched straight over to Heather and Steve, who were making last minute plans for the session they were leading. He laughed again and handed Steve a beautiful cellophane package which was filled with tiny, exquisitely folded, multicoloured origami stars. He then shot off with his parents before Steve could even say "Thank you!" His Mother said, "We wondered why he was making that and who it was for – we had no idea!"

Steve, a facilitator whose Who am I poster boasts that he can "Talk for Scotland!" - was lost for words...but only for a moment. He turned to Heather and said "Well, he's got the bit about Gifts then!"



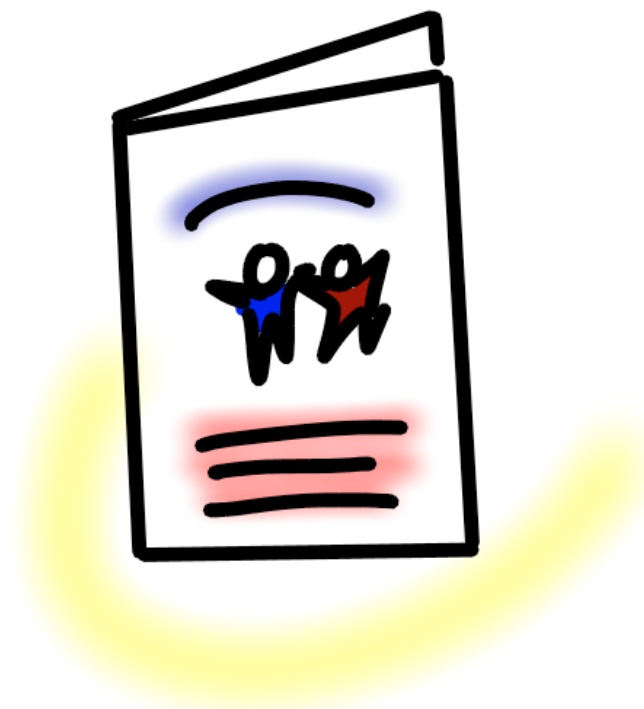


## WHY WE WROTE THIS

Essentially, we have written this little book because we think the idea of working with young people and their families in large groups is a really good one. In telling the stories of how we attempted to apply this good idea in practice in England and Scotland we hope that more people will be encouraged to give it a go. We feel a wee bit cheeky doing this as we can claim neither authorship nor enormous expertise and experience in these approaches but we do think it has been a worthwhile endeavour to make this happen on this side of the Atlantic.

At the outset however, we must acknowledge the folk whose creativity and hard work has developed this approach in the first place and thank them for their generosity and encouragement in helping us to get started; Freda Rosen, Carolann Granata and all those at Job Path and of course Connie Lyle O'Brien and Beth Mount who first took the plunge to facilitate a large room full of young people and their parents and carers. Subsequently, Beth and Connie have been instrumental in spreading the word about this approach to other parts of the USA and in recent months to the UK also.

Their insights and suggestions emerge from a decade of stories from working with more than a hundred families . In the past year we have led three groups between us, therefore our work is at a very fledgling stage and our thoughts



should be understood in this context. Nevertheless, it is fascinating to note that the Pathfinders programme has evolved and changed as it has learned from the real experts, the young people and their families and supporters. What started as an ambitious person centred planning training programme, morphed into something more profound in New York. It is our earnest hope that a similar process of learning and renewal can start to develop in these countries.

We hope that this little book might encourage others to try this approach but we stress that it should not be read as a “blueprint” to be applied to the letter. If you read on, you will soon recognize that the energy and creativity of the approach challenges standardization and systemization. This is very much about empowerment and imagination. If people get one thing from this book it should be “We want to do this too but it will look a bit different where we live!”

The book starts with a description of where the idea for the work originated, before going on to describe how we tried to set up The Big Plan and Good Life After School programmes. We then discuss what we actually did in the sessions, before considering what participants fed back to us about the groups. Lastly, we reflect on what we have learned from this exciting work and make some tentative suggestions for its future development. We have included a list of further reading at the end where those who are interested can discover more about the application of this

model in the USA and other information which underpinned the programmes we delivered in Redcar and Cleveland and Edinburgh.



## **A LITTLE BACKGROUND WHERE THE IDEA CAME FROM**

In May 2003 both of the authors attended the Scottish Human Services Conference at Heriot – Watt University in Edinburgh, where they heard an inspiring presentation by Connie Lyle O'Brien about the Pathfinders Project in New York City. Connie described the origins of the programme in a training initiative in 1993. Teachers, administrators and transition coordinators from 9 New York City special education schools, came together with 12 students and their families to learn about person centred planning.

Connie and her co-facilitator Beth Mount, soon began to realise that this mixture of people was the catalyst for a process that went well beyond a training course. In particular, they recognised the benefits of the young people listening to each other and the parents and carers learning from one another. By 2003 and with the benefit of hindsight, Connie was describing this as a process of “self – efficacy” whereby students and families recognised and respected each other’s strengths and gifts, growing in confidence and self-esteem as a result.

Self-efficacy is a concept developed by Albert Bandura. It is not the same as self-esteem, it is:

“...a belief in one’s ability to accomplish something de-



spite difficulties rather than a sense of being valuable as a person."

A fuller discussion of self-efficacy and its relationship to person centred planning can be found in John O'Brien and Connie Lyle O'Brien's excellent book (see further reading section)

Over the subsequent decade, the Pathfinders Project developed and adapted its approach. A small supported employment agency called Job Path, took the lead in organising and maintaining the programme, where two of their staff devoted most of their time to the endeavour.

Funded by the New York State Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities and New York City Special Education Programme, Pathfinders is now entering its twelfth year. More than 100 students have benefited from the experience and almost half of these have found post – school opportunities which lie beyond traditional, segregated services designed for people with disability labels only. Given that all the participants on the programme had begun their education in a special school setting, these appeared to us to be fairly impressive outcomes. We both applied the model to the situations we were aware of in this country and wondered, "Could this work here?"

Heather was working with local authorities in the North East of England under the auspices of the Valuing People Support Team. Valuing People is the English national





strategy for learning disability and is a:

“...comprehensive statement of policy with detailed and challenging objectives which, if achieved, would strongly progress inclusion for people with learning disabilities”

One of the key strands of Valuing People is to make opportunities for person centred planning available to people with learning disabilities. Several groups of people are highlighted as being priority groups for planning and one of these groups is young people in transition from education to adult services. Within this context many local authorities were trying to work out the best way to engage young people and their families in planning for the future – and finding it a real struggle.

Many workers in local authorities found it difficult to ask young people about what they wanted to do with their lives. The constraints operating within local authorities; lack of money and other resources; few available work placements; very little opportunity to make something different happen and also the difficulty of imagining something different meant that staff found it extremely challenging to work creatively and effectively with this target group. To hear young people describe what they want and yet only have a very limited range of service options to offer to them was difficult for many workers. The gap between what people said they wanted and what local authorities could provide was huge and few people ventured near



the edge for fear of falling in. There was a great deal of talk about being realistic; keeping things manageable; thinking about the pressure on resources and not setting people up to fail. Everyone thought that it was difficult but not many people had any ideas about what to do about it. The stories from Pathfinders made us think that it might be possible to do something different.

Although the legislative context was broadly similar, the situation in Scotland was little different for young people with learning difficulties and their families. Steve had worked on the Future Plans Project at Edinburgh Development Group (EDG) since the end of 2002. That Project, funded by the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund had sought to offer person centred planning as a resource to young people leaving school and their families. The aspiration had been to give young people a greater voice in the Future Needs Assessment processes. The Project undertook some useful work with individual families and in some special educational schools but by-and-large, the “transition processes” struggled to include families as full partners or to make space for young people to talk about the dreams and aspirations they were articulating in their person centred plans. At a time when the Scottish Executive, recognising the shortcomings of the existing system, was introducing the new Additional Support for Learning Act , it seemed a good time to add a new approach to empowering young people into the equation.



In short we thought that if it could work in the immensely diverse communities of New York City with 140 languages, dozens of cultures and widely contrasting class experiences, it had a chance in Edinburgh or Middlesbrough regardless of how poorly services deal with transition at the moment!

The authors then set off in their own fashion to see if they could make it happen. Heather Simmons chatted to Connie Lyle O'Brien at the Conference and began discussions with some of her colleagues.

Heather had a close working relationship with the Learning Disability section of Redcar and Cleveland Social Services and in particular with Derek Birtwhistle who was at that time Person Centred Planning Coordinator for the authority. Redcar and Cleveland were concerned about how best to work with the "transition group" of young people who were in their last years at the 2 local special schools. Although the Authority had trained around 40 people as person centred planning facilitators there were only a few people available who felt confident and competent enough to facilitate plans. From the service perspective there were issues around releasing staff from their usual posts to give them time for planning and yet still maintain adequate levels of service and so there were some concerns about how to offer person centred plans to everyone in the transition group.

Heather talked to Derek about the work that Connie and



Beth had been doing and wondered if Derek would be interested in trying it out. She explained that she and Steve had only read about Pathfinders and chatted to Connie but wondered if she and Steve were to offer their time as facilitators for free, might Derek be interested in giving this way of working a try?

Now, Derek Birtwhistle is the kind of person every local authority should have. Legend has it that Derek could go out in the morning with £1 in his pocket and come back in the evening with £10! He is an expert at making money work. As well as being a genius with money, Derek has a strong belief in the values of inclusion and a willingness to do whatever it takes to help people get the kind of lives they want. He did some sums and felt that it might be possible to cover the costs of the venue and the facilitators' expenses and so he agreed to have a go at finding the money to make it happen.

Steve began reading as much as he could about Pathfinders and e-mailed questions he came up with to Connie and Beth in the USA who were generous and encouraging in their responses. In consultation with Heather, he began to draft outline programmes and summaries of the background to the project, preparing to find possible funding for an "Edinburgh Pathfinders."

In their article about the New York experience, Beth Mount, Fredda Rosen, John O'Brien and Connie Lyle O'Brien described the Pathfinders Programme as a Person





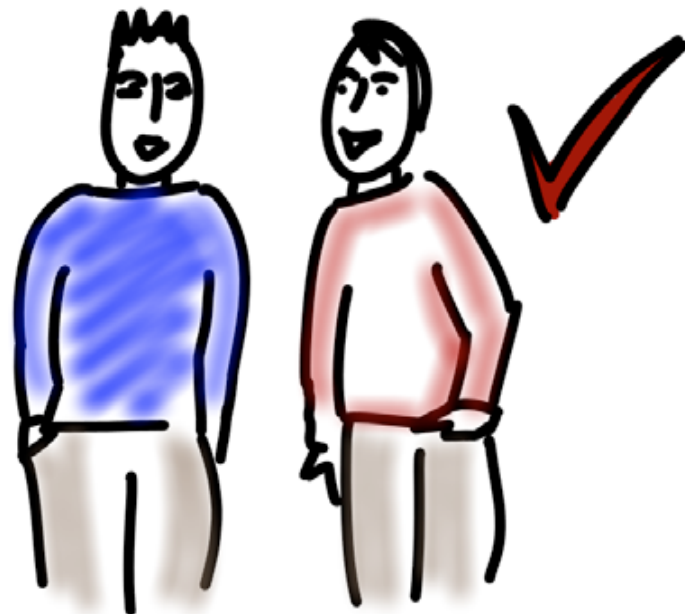
Centred Development Project which was based on the following basic pillars:

- A focus question, framed as follows:

“Could students, whose current best option is placement in a segregated adult day service, find paid and voluntary work in community settings, become involved in social and recreational activities in their neighbourhood, and develop new friendships and associations in their workplaces and communities?”

- A working group that creates the space to explore new ways to act on that question
- A programme based on the 5 accomplishments (although in their more recent writing, Beth Mount and Connie Lyle O'Brien alternatively describe “5 dimensions of inclusion” or “5 valued experiences”
- Ways to learn and renew
- Forums that engage people with control over important resources in the learning generated by the workshops

We thought that our best first step was to try to make one group happen. It was highly unlikely that initial funding would be for an ongoing programme and that although this might be an aspiration, we would have to show that it could work in the first instance. Consequently, we adopted a fairly pragmatic approach with an emphasis on trying to



make it happen.

Towards the end of 2003, Heather was given the “go-ahead” to try and run a programme in Redcar and Cleveland, with The Valuing People Team entering into a partnership with the authorities for two special schools. As money was tight, this was on the basis that Heather led the groups along with Derek. They thought of a name, designed a logo for the programme and “The Big Plan” was born!

After an initial meeting with staff from both schools and an introductory session to which all pupils and their parents were invited, a group of 8 students was recruited and the programme run over five sessions up until the summer term of 2004. Sessions were held in the Riverside Stadium, home of the local football team, Middlesbrough FC.

Early in 2004, Steve’s organisation, Edinburgh Development Group (EDG) was offered some funding by the City’s Changing Children’s Service Fund to deliver a version of this approach for the first time in Scotland. Recruitment to this group was mostly done through social work and education networks, but without a comprehensive “sign off” from the schools themselves. This programme was called a “Good Life After School” and ran from February to June 2005. Heather and Steve jointly facilitated the large group sessions for this programme.

At the same time a second “Big Plan” group gathered in Redcar and Cleveland.



Steve also had the good fortune to meet Fredda Rosen and Carolann Granata of Job Path, NYC and Dr. Beth Mount, around the same time he was recruiting families to the Good Life After School programme. It was good to hear how the American model had developed over the years and a number of useful insights were gained.

- Pathfinders now focussed rather more time on collaboration and partnerships with service providers interested in offering innovative, individualised and person centred support to young people and less on the schools and education system itself. This was partly a result of the state scrapping the Transition Coordinator posts which were centrally involved in the early days of the project – but also because experience showed the importance of collaboration with services which tried to respond in an inclusive, individual way to young peoples' aspirations. Encouragement of more of these kinds of services began to fill some of the gaps which had previously existed.
- Experience had shown that larger groups could be difficult and they advised us that smaller numbers could in fact be most effective for those taking part.
- Steve learned that most of the young people participating in Pathfinders were between the ages of 19-21, considerably older than the target group we had focused on in Scotland and England. This was due to the leaving age for students in special education in

New York City being later.

We had also been encouraged to read of adaptations and developments to the Pathfinders model, elsewhere in the USA . The Sequoia project in particular, had evidenced terrific creativity with their approach to the programme adapting frameworks to better meet the needs of a group which included older participants and carers. This further encouraged the hope that we could adopt the model to the different situations we faced in Edinburgh and Redcar and Cleveland.

