

Ireland



Blossom Personal Empowerment Project (PEP)



Keyword(s):

Disadvantaged Groups of Learners

Labour Market and VET

Introduction

The Blossom Personal Empowerment Programme (PEP) provides skills based training and support for young people with an intellectual disability between the ages of 15 and 20. The programme was initially developed in 2017 based on the information gained from focus groups with young people and their families.

In November 2020 Blossom Ireland launched the PEP assertiveness course through our new accessible blended learning model called My Blossom Channel.

The aim of this innovative course is to teach young people with ID to speak up, give opinions, clearly state preferences and learn about their strengths and how to communicate them to others. Over the course of six weeks the young people engage weekly with a Blossom Facilitator and complete specific activities through our learning platform. Blossom worked with a multidisciplinary team including; Young people with ID, Speech and Language Therapist, Learning Consultant, Psychologist and Teaching staff to ensure the course is fully accessible for young people who are not reading or writing. It is a highly visual course with a significant amount of video content. Assessments are video based and by the end of the six weeks learner have video footage showcasing the new skills they have learned.

Main challenge

Young people with an intellectual disability are under-represented in the areas of further education and employment. Current research in the Irish context has shown that there is a need for more structured, planned and individualized transition planning for this cohort for them to successfully find their own paths in life. The Personal Empowerment Programme came about as a response to this gap in educational services. In response to the COvid-19 pandemic Blossom Ireland created an accessible blended learning programme to ensure the continuation of our programme and extend the reach of our courses.

Timing

My Blossom Channel was developed in 2020 with the first course running in November of that year. The move to a blended learning format and the development of a learning management platform was prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Objective

The objective of the project was to create an accessible blended learning programme for young people with an ID where they could continue to learn valuable life skills during the pandemic.

Target group

The programme was specifically for young people in Ireland with an intellectual disability aged 14-25.

Geographical range

The programme was and is available nationwide. To date young people across 10 counties have taken part in the course.

Stakeholders and partners

Our aim was to meet young people with ID where they are. So we have successfully partnered with Schools, disability services and with young people in their family homes. We have provided support and training to each young person's 'Champion'. These have been School staff, parents, care workers, family friends and siblings.

We engaged our stakeholders from the onset of the development of the programme. A young person with an ID was employed as part of the course development panel of experts and young people with intellectual disabilities are employed to deliver parts of the programme.

Blossom Ireland have linked in with other organisations working with disabled people in Ireland. We have extended services through The Down Syndrome Centre, Schools and are presently in discussions with ASIAM and Muscular Dystrophy Ireland.

Blossom Ireland have joined a consortium with TCD Centre for Intellectual Disability, WALK, Down Syndrome Ireland, CDETB and Inclusion Ireland. This group meets every two months with the purpose of sharing ideas, new developments and policy updates that have an impact on people with ID in Ireland. This group supports reviewing accessibility of content and also assists with understanding how we can work together.

Strategy / materials

Blossom Ireland had successfully worked with many young people with ID and their families over the past ten years. Through this time mutual understanding and trust had been developed. Blossom Ireland had conducted focus groups with young people and families to assess what services were most needed at this time. Blossom Ireland had also successfully got funding from the ESF and the Dept of Social Protection through the ability fund. This opportunity also allowed us to form a network with other likeminded organisations with similar goals.

Blossom Ireland used social media and our own website to promote our strategy. We also used our network through our other ability funded contacts and contacted Schools and other organisations directly.

It was very important to us from the beginning to make sure the programme was participatory and inclusive. A young person with ID was employed to give on going feedback and was an important member of the development panel. We also employ two other staff with an ID who assist with the delivery of the course and in the creation of accessible materials. The programme was developed to empower young people with ID therefore it was important they were always at the centre of it.

Resources

We developed professional video materials, course materials including accessible posters and materials to assist with language and communication online.

Compliance with Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)

Blossom Ireland strives to ensure that all young people with ID in Ireland are appropriately supported through all key transitions in life. We focus on the transition from school to life after school and the skills needed to succeed in further education and training. Currently people with ID are extremely under-represented in the further education and 85% of this population remain unemployed. Blossom Ireland through this program aim to change this.

Innovation(s)

People with an intellectual disability were particularly negatively impacted by Covid 19. Research completed by Inclusion Ireland (2020) and our own research highlighted the fact that services had ceased completely or had been very faded back. Blossom created a highly visual accessible webinar for young people with ID focussing on coping skills and planning. We also continued to work with the young people and their families through our connect service that had converted to an online model. Blossom had to react quickly to insure the young people we are working with continued to feel connected and could continue to learn. Initially we set up weekly sessions to teach the young people to use the online methods of communication.

We also created accessible resources showing how to use social media and zoom stay connected. Our Peer Mentors really excelled with this task and brought the best out of our young people. In the background we had begun work on our blended learning team including our Programme Advocate, Learning Consultant, SLT and Programme staff to develop a learning management system that was fully accessible to students who were not reading or writing. My Blossom Channel's assertiveness course was launched in November 2020. Blossom Ireland won the Star award from Aontas for Mitigating educational disadvantage using innovation during COvid – 19 for this course.

Evaluation

To measure the impact of PEP® we use quantitative metrics for skills development, qualitative feedback from the young people with ID and their families, case studies and periodic service reviews. We follow up with the young people and their families, particularly in relation to transition into employment and work experience opportunities. Within 6 months of completing the 2019 programme, 33% of graduates from our 2019 stage programme were in paid employment.

Blossom collect Individualised data for all participants so progress is tracked in a clear and consistent way. For example on average students in PEP (2019) increased their score on the skills covered in social skills for life by 43.14%. For Community life skills their scores increased by an average of 32.5%. For preparing for life after school their scores increased by an average of 51.88%.

Blossom Ireland have just completed (November 2021) a research paper showing the impact of the assertiveness course across 52 young people with an ID. Data was gathered by formal direct observations and pre and post surveys. The findings clearly show that the course has led to increased confidence and assertiveness skills amongst participants. Both the young person's and their 'Champion' supporters reports were taken into account. This paper is awaiting acceptance for publication from a peer reviewed Journal. After each course has been completed we communicate directly with the students and their families.

Success parameters

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Impact

We measure our impact by gathering information from young people and their supporters at the start and after they have completed the programme. Along with this trained Blossom Facilitators take on going individual observational data showing how the young person's skills are developing over time. The good practice has shown to have had a significant positive impact on the lives of the young people involved and their families. Young people and their family and other supporters report increased levels of assertiveness, ability to speak about themselves and their strengths and increased ability to give their opinion in their daily lives.

Impediments

Blossom Ireland is primarily funded through grants and donations. Keeping a good passionate and skilled staff team can be a challenge with funding that is sought on an ongoing basis. Relationships with other organisations and Schools also had to be developed over time. Time commitments and other work commitments of staff and families sometimes had to be worked around in a flexible way.

We continue to gather strong evidence for our approach and communicate the finding to our stakeholders and funders on a regular basis. We work hard on communicating and working with other organisations and keeping an open mind to others' perspectives.

Replicability

We have successfully run our programme with multiple organisations, Schools and home settings across the country. We are planning one international course for next year and have received interest from other EU countries.

When replicating the concept, accessibility must be kept foremost in mind. Our online learning component is accessible to learners who are not reading and have very limited literacy skills. Level of literacy was a huge barrier to many young people with ID taking part in educational courses. The programme needs to be very much led by young people with ID and there needs to be strong ongoing communication with all stakeholders.

Concluding remarks

The development and rolling out of this strategy has been a hugely informative and rewarding experience for all involved. We have since completed a second course to develop key concepts further. This has also been successfully rolled out and across twelve young people. After finishing the course each young person was able to confidently speak about their disability, had increased confidence making decisions and knowing what accessibility means. 100% of the first group were able to verbalise their own hopes and dreams for the future including preferred employment after completing both courses.

“It was a great course that I really enjoyed. I developed a lot as a person and met some great people.” Participant, Assertiveness Course May 2021

“The Blossom course content teaches about assertiveness in accessible and practical way. It builds slowly, in a group environment and great team support.” Parent, Assertiveness Course May 2021

Website/Social Media profile(s) of the initiative

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