Mindset change (is essential) - transforming erroneous perceptions of ability

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Irish Deaf Kids

Introduction

Fearing for their disabled child's social, emotional and physical well-being, parents can go to great lengths to protect their child and, in the process, unwittingly limit their potential. This projection of parental fears and perceived limitations reinforces society's erroneous perceptions of ability, translating into poor educational attainment for many children with disability and correlated high levels of unemployment.

Successful role models with disability are essential to reversing this outcome and revising society's outdated attitudes (Gov.uk, 2013), whilst being a vital information, advocacy and support link for parents, educators and employers. Role models with lived experience of a disability, can guide parents on approaches (Beginnings, 2008), one example being the mother in France who travelled to secure bilateral (both-ear) cochlear implants for her son (Pisanne, 2012). Inspired by this case study on the Irish Deaf Kids website, a group of parents in Ireland launched the Happy New Ear campaign in 2012 to seek bilateral cochlear implants for infants who are eligible for the procedure (O'Cionnaith, 2012).

Role models with disability:
- mentor parents in empowering children with disability
- guide educators in understanding disability and its impact on learning
- explain how technology gives access
- advise how students benefit from basic changes to classroom layout and teaching practice
- encourage employers to support youth with disability to gain vital experience

The IDK Approach

The author is a profoundly deaf, social entrepreneur and founder of Irish Deaf Kids (IDK), a government award-winning social venture in Ireland which supports inclusive education for children and young people with hearing issues. Through its wide range of activities, the IDK venture works to empower parents to develop their deaf child's full potential. IDK advocates for awareness of child deafness among its primary stakeholders (parents, educators, policymakers, employers and technology firms), whilst highlighting ability, technical tools and devices to facilitate inclusion, participation and equality in mainstream settings.

As a verbal deaf person, the author does not use sign language but communicates verbally in English despite her profound deafness – which means her natural hearing ability begins at the noise level of a jet plane taking off from an airport (ATA, 2011). The author does not hear sounds below ninety-five decibels without hearing-aids. However, today's digital hearing-

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aids and cochlear implants give her and many other wearers access to everyday sounds, including spoken language and active listening ability.

In the 1970s, IDK's founder was among the first deaf pupils in Ireland to be mainstream-educated among their hearing peers with limited support, when most deaf students were educated in sign language at special schools (Irish Deaf Kids, 2008). The author graduated from secondary school to Trinity College, Dublin, where she gained an honours degree before the disability office existed. After participating in student summer work programmes in the USA and Canada, she moved to Oxford (UK) on graduation, where she gained a postgraduate diploma and worked in mainstream demanding careers in digital publishing before returning to Ireland to continue in digital media and marketing.

As a proactive role model and advisor to government, state and semi-state bodies, cultural and artistic entities in Ireland, and as an advocate, employer, trainer and mentor, Caroline works through IDK to build understanding of deafness and ability in the training, education and employment spheres. The range of products, information and services provided by IDK addresses primary topics for its stakeholders. Core outcomes include the design of educational settings (physical lay-out and teaching tools) and raised parental expectations for deaf students. IDK's workshops similarly build young deaf peoples' self-esteem, social skills and career ambitions, while employers are guided in the employability of deaf persons.

What is Irish Deaf Kids (IDK)?

IDK is a social enterprise which works to support inclusive education for children and young people with hearing issues in Ireland, while empowering parents to develop their child's full potential. According to Celia Richardson of Social Enterprise UK, "social enterprises spot the social problem and the social opportunity first, but use business methods and create wealth to solve them" (BBC, 2012). In the UK, social enterprises contribute £8.4 billion to GDP (Northey, 2010), with the 2013 Social Enterprise Survey showing two-thirds (63%) of social enterprises expecting turnover to increase through 2016, versus 37% of mainstream SMEs (Social Enterprise UK, 2013).

Social enterprises are run by social entrepreneurs, who (a) act for public benefit (b) have innovative solutions to defined problems and (c) have the ability to grow their idea to maximise its impact. In 2007, the IDK venture was a response to the Irish government's passing of the EPSEN Act (2004) to mainstream-educate all school-aged children in Ireland, irrespective of ability or educational needs (Irish Government, 2004). After her experiences, IDK's founder saw potential shortfalls in the EPSEN Act, and in 2011 Ireland's National Council for Special Education noted, "The EPSEN Act has not been fully implemented due to economic circumstances" (NCSE, 2011).

Technology is core to IDK's social entrepreneurship approach, with its website as the hub of the social venture delivering disruptive, low-cost services to a global audience with free, web-based tools. To date, 35% of visitors to the website are from outside Ireland, which shows the venture's impact at home and abroad. In short, technology is the enabler, equaliser and empowering tool for the IDK team (deaf and hearing) to serve the families, students, educators, policymakers and stakeholders accessing IDK's services.

Technology as a Leveller

How does technology benefit students with hearing issues? How many people know that deafness prompted the invention of telephone, internet and SMS text services (Walsh, 2010)? In 1876, Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone while developing a hearing-aid for his wife. A century later, Vinton Cerf, Google's chief technology evangelist, used ARPA, the early internet, to share documents with his research team – instead of struggling with phone conversations. Equally, Finland's Matti Makonen, invented SMS texting for deaf people to communicate, and when this solution saved telecom bandwidth, the world of telecommunications altered.

Today, thanks to newborn hearing tests, deaf infants are given access to discreet digital hearing-devices and soundfield systems from their earliest months of life. Similarly, digital tools and classroom captions (real-time and video-based) are levelling mainstream classroom environments for these children, who have portable access toolkits at their fingertips from smart tablets and phones. With personal hearing and device-based technologies converging, young deaf pupils and students have huge potential for using telecom-linked tools to achieve integration, equality and understanding in their schools, colleges and workplaces. The power of technology cannot be underestimated at any level for students and employees who have hearing issues.

IDK's Role of Dialogue, Understanding and Inclusion

If deaf children are to live happy and successful lives, then parents, educators, policy makers, service providers, employers and the public must understand deafness and collaborate to create inclusive environments. Mainstream education raises awareness of and normalises disability, while building empathy and mutual understanding within the local ecosystem (NCSE, 2011). Dialogue about hearing issues raises school, campus and workplace awareness of the challenges the students or employees meet daily, which feeds into better service and understanding in multiple areas, even after an individual leaves a physical setting.

This understanding of hearing issues is vital for facilitating inclusion for students and employees in varied settings, while correcting erroneous perceptions of their ability once and for all. IDK talks of the Power of One in social-change (Drayton, 2006) this may be a deaf student who smashes assumptions by using their talents in a specific way, or an individual who finds solutions to break into a profession not typically open to people with hearing issues. In the UK and Ireland, deaf professionals are thin on the ground, but ideally this will change as these individuals and their business partners link up via social networking sites and internet technologies.

Proactive service providers realise that people with hearing issues may use their products and services differently and can use these vital insights to optimise their technologies, products and services to benefit more people with disability. Most importantly, inclusive education encourages the next generation to consider users with disability when designing, developing and building new products, buildings, facilities and services. Facilitating this dialogue enables IDK to mainstream first-hand knowledge about deafness and the impact it has on daily lives, in an approach that defines challenges and suggests digital tools as

everyday solutions.

Social Needs and IDK's Role Modelling Approach

Through its Dialogue-Understanding-Inclusion model, IDK uses its website and monthly e-zine to educate visitors and complement its workshops, seminars, conferences and consulting activity. The founder's experience of being mainstream-educated with family and teachers untrained to work with deaf children, informs the venture's dialogue with stakeholders who need to understand deafness, particularly with Ireland's government now mainstream-educating most children with disability.

Parents must understand deafness - namely how a child learns and interacts and how to advise family members on conversing with the child, such as getting the child's attention before speaking, not moving their arms around while speaking, and not over-accentuating their speech to "benefit" the child. Cousins and local children may need deafness explained to them (Gaynor, 2008), while adult family members may welcome details about hearing-devices, captioned TV and videos.

Teachers face the real challenge of a teacher-education system that does not prepare for teaching pupils with disability (Kern, 2013). They visit our website to gain understanding, for insights to universal technologies and for reassurance that simple things make a difference in a classroom of children with mixed abilities.

Employers need to know what deaf people can hear with today's digital devices and learn about technologies that a deaf person can use in mainstream workplaces. Successful deaf professionals and students need visibility with employers to educate them of their ability. The power of positive role models is vital. Many deaf people have very successful careers and employers must see their examples to lose the fear of hiring someone who is deaf. The IDK team actively models this, with their mainstream employment at home and abroad, their use of technology, their dialogue with employers on workplace concerns and how to constructively address these challenges.

Social Entrepreneurship and IDK at NADP's Conference

So, what is the relevance of social entrepreneurship and IDK to NADP's 2013 conference? Essentially, the founder has the lived experience of deafness, knows the challenges and was mainstream-educated when support and technology was basic and disability awareness limited. She graduated from university and secured mainstream employment despite a lack of support or awareness, and is now an employer, advisor, mentor, trainer, advocate and communicator – while challenging outdated perceptions of deafness.

Since 2008, IDK has provided internship employment for self-starting graduates with strong work experience (Fox, 2012). Several were hired from IDK by blue-chip firms to work in digital teaching, social media, marketing and PR as ambassadors of services for deaf people. Meanwhile, IDK's founder actively advises educators, arts and cultural entities, the Kanchi business-ability network (Casey, 2008) and the corporate sector with hearing-awareness training and workplace assessments delivered to clients' needs. She mentors young graduates (hearing and deaf), advocates and communicates on behalf of young people with deafness – and addresses stakeholders nationally (Keane, 2012) and internationally

(Carswell, 2012) on how technology is a leveller for deafness.

Successful Outcomes – the Factors

Early teamwork was key to the IDK founder's upbringing, with spoken language acquisition, social skills and confidence-building initiated by her parents, speech teacher and primary school. Through secondary school and university, she continued her self-development, starting part-time retail work aged 16 and building her personal skill-set with volunteering and travelling. This teen work experience was an asset, with employers actively seeking initiative, experience, strong social skills and problem-solving ability – which persons with disability particularly need when their competencies are queried by others.

Competitive workplaces give practice in challenging outdated views of deaf people (Rossney, 2010), as IDK's founder found at an recruitment agency when seeking a graduate position. Using her experience as a retailer dealing with the public, she converted a negative, interpersonal exchange with tones of discrimination into a positive outcome, when a competing recruiter who witnessed the scenario stepped forward and offered her a chance to move into a full-time permanent role. With over 20 years as a professional, IDK's founder is a person who happens to be deaf, is a social entrepreneur, and courteously deals with people who need awareness.

What Still Needs to Change?

Newborn hearing tests are vital, with this early detection giving families and professionals time to develop a child's listening, verbal language and learning skills before preschool starts. Children who are deaf have a communication challenge - not a learning disability, unless other needs are present, such as Down's syndrome – and realistically, children who get sustained early intervention should meet all their development milestones.

With today's digital hearing-devices, early detection and personal/environmental technologies, deaf children have huge potential in mainstream education. Educators still need to understand deafness and the children's learning needs, with teacher education adapting accordingly (NCSE, 2012). Equally, the public should know deafness varies at a personal level, with most people presently assuming all deaf individuals converse silently in sign language when many are verbal. Greater awareness of deafness, communication needs and modes will vastly improve public services, attitudes and facilities for all deaf people, in education and in workplaces (Hicks & Gilmore, 2012).

Parents can be real change-makers in this process, but must learn to see their deaf child first as a person with ability, interests and passions just like their own personalities and secondly, as a child with a disability: this shapes the child's self-identity, education and career choice.

No ideal career exists for a deaf person (just as there is no ideal career for a hearing person), but deaf people are now finding success in nascent fields after identifying solutions that will benefit future deaf students in that field. IDK is regularly asked what a good career is for a deaf person. There is no such thing: chiropody, nutrition, librarianship or architecture were suggested to IDK's founder, but the team knows of deaf dentists, medics, audiologists, lawyers, veterinarians, pharmacologists and deaf pilots (Irish Deaf Kids, 2012).

IDK's advice to young people is to know yourself and seek to match your skills and interests to career types and then investigate if deafness will be an issue (but don't assume it is, or will be). Animal-lovers may review different roles in the veterinary field based on expected exam results, or alternatively animal grooming, training, welfare and pet care. In short, research the requirements, check if deafness is an issue, speak to professionals in that field, visit the colleges and do research. The IDK website has some great real-life examples of deaf people working in a wide range of professions and what technologies they use in their work.

Career Paths - What Still Needs to Change?

Owning your disability and quickly giving others pertinent information about it is a vital part of growing up and taking charge of your life, while building your self-development and future career paths. Parents, family members and schools must mentor young people with disability to believe in their talents and to speak up for their ability when this is queried. IDK's life skills workshops respond to this need by introducing young deaf people to successful deaf professionals for mentoring, while building vital communication and other life skills.

IDK's youth workshops are backed by some of Ireland's leading employers, including multi-nationals (Carswell, 2013) which prove that our work is valued and appreciated. Furthermore, IDK is recognised as a team of professionals working to improve understanding of deafness and access to educational, recreational and employment opportunities for deaf children and young people. Through IDK's work and services, we are educating and supporting educators, parents, deaf young people, deaf children – the message is getting out there and change, although a slow process, can be seen to happen.

Table 1: Positive Actions Toward Career Paths

Group and/or Entity	Action
Schools, Parents and Family	Support and enable a young person with disability to acquire personal skills to handle challenging situations. Teach them to speak up for their needs and to confidently deal with discrimination where encountered.
Students and young deaf people	Own your disability and give a very brief summary when meeting new people. This way, you can confidently challenge negative perceptions.
Employers and Recruiters	Seek out role models with disability, and learn about different disabilities so you are equipped to support employees and clients in workplaces.
Human Resources/Management	Mentor a young person with disability; ensure they can access training in the skills to handle challenging situations, to speak up for their needs and to confidently address discrimination as necessary.

Conclusion - Why IDK?

On establishing IDK, the founder noted, "The fundamental change that I want to see in Ireland is for deaf people to have a full role in mainstream society, without hearing people feeling awkward because they don't understand deafness." (Murphy, 2007). Deaf people have a huge role in this ambition: we must be open about our disability, explain what it means, its impact, what it's like and how technology can help us to self-actualise. Today's deaf children have huge opportunities with digital tools (Shah, 2011) and IDK is moving everyone forward with investment from the corporate sector, together with input from educators and IDK's service users.

Change is happening. Remember, for deaf people to move from education to employment, we need change. Be part of that change with IDK. Open dialogue and hearing awareness is needed: if a baby is identified as being deaf, early intervention can begin immediately, which means children can reach their age development milestones. Parents at this vulnerable stage need encouragement and positive role models who are deaf and mainstream-educated, with first-hand experience of being deaf in educational and workplace settings.

Educators need to understand deafness in classrooms and to see positive role models, so they know deaf students can be successfully mainstream-educated. Employers equally need to see positive role models with strong communication, life skills and educational backgrounds, who will make fantastic, dedicated, able employees, once that fear of hiring these graduates and facilitating their inclusion is overcome.

IDK works at all these levels to ensure that children who are deaf or hard of hearing, get to develop their full potential in mainstream education, without overprotective parents limiting their children's growth or preventing them from taking their real place in the world due to concerns about "not managing" in a mainstream society.

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