



# 'Humour can open the door to conversations': Exploring the Role of Comedy in Breaking Down Barriers to Employment for Young Disabled People

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## Abstract

Young disabled people encounter many barriers in their transition to adulthood, including having access to the world of work. According to recent data, only 4.8% of adults with a learning disability are in paid work. We wanted to explore how we might address one of the initial barriers, the employment recruitment process. Eleven young disabled people were invited to work with The Comedy Trust to make their own video Curriculum Vitae (CV). We hoped to explore how we could draw on the art form of comedy to not only produce video CVs but also to share the voices of young people with a learning disability. Young people with learning disabilities have a desire to work and have the skills necessary to succeed in the workplace with appropriate support. This paper highlights the importance of employers and those who support young disabled people, having the opportunity to hear the voices of young people so they can consider how to make their recruitment process more inclusive and to address the barriers that are experienced.

**Keywords** Employment · Disabled young people · Co-production · Barriers · Accessible recruitment and comedy

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## Introduction

This paper offers an overview of a co-produced research project which brings together a young disabled person (Harry), a careers lead and inclusion mentor based within a special school (Sarah), a community operations and fundraising manager based within The Comedy Trust and a university academic. We wanted to explore how we might address some of the barriers experienced by young people with a learning disability when entering the world of work. A group of 11 young people were invited to take part in a collaborative research project to capture their experiences of working with the Comedy Trust (CT). During the CT programme, young people with a learning disability were given the opportunity to make their own video CV. With one of the biggest barriers to accessing the world of work being negative perceptions and assumptions about what young disabled people can/not do, video CVs provide the opportunity to challenge such misconceptions. Here, comedy played a key role in not only developing young people's confidence but also providing a space for them to use humour and laughter to discuss barriers encountered. This paper offers an insight into the young people's experiences of taking part in the programme. We hope to explore not only the role of comedy in highlighting the inequalities that are encountered by young disabled people with a learning disability but also how humour and laughter can be powerful tools in promoting social change.

## Barriers to Employment for Young Disabled People

There is wide acknowledgement of the difficulties young people with a learning disability face as they move into adulthood (Burch 2018; Pearson et al. 2021). In the UK, disabled young people are less likely to be in employment, training, or education when compared to their non-disabled peers (Powell 2017). Only 4.8% of adults with a learning disability known to their local authority in England are in paid work (BASE 2023). There have been several government policies and initiatives aimed at ensuring more young disabled people have opportunities to enter the world of work such as the National Disability Strategy (DWP 2021) and Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfE 2014). Supported Internships have been highlighted as a key initiative in providing access to the workplace for young disabled people. They are defined as:

a structured, work-based study programme for 16 to 24-year-olds with SEND, who have an education, health and care (EHC) plan. The core aim of a supported internship study programme is a substantial work placement, facilitated by the support of an expert job coach (DfE 2022).

Supported Internships offer young people the opportunity to gain work experience whilst being supported by a job coach. Job coaches play a vital role in ensuring young disabled people's support needs are being met. Research by Romualdez et al. (2020), which explored the job coach role, found that whilst job coaches were happy to see the young people they were supporting developing employment goals and

future ambitions. However after witnessing numerous rejections; the job coaches were worried about whether Supported Internships would lead to long-term employment opportunities. There is concern then that such initiatives do not go far enough to address the structural barriers that are experienced by young people with learning disabilities (Pearson et al. 2021; Bates et al. 2017). In addition, they are yet to lead to a real increase in the number of people with learning disabilities in paid employment (Giri et al. 2022). Young people are expected to leave school and successfully transition into the workplace, but there is growing acknowledgement of the need to recognise the barriers that exclude some groups of young people (McPherson 2021; McLaughlin 2023). For young disabled people, such barriers would include not having access to education, inaccessible transport, and negative perceptions leading to stigmatisation and discrimination (McLaughlin 2023).

We draw on the social model of disability in our understanding of the barriers encountered by young disabled people. We hope to highlight and address the environmental, social, and cultural barriers that lead to the discrimination and exclusion that are experienced by disabled young people within our society (Oliver 1990). The CT successfully secured funding to deliver a programme aimed at developing young disabled people's careers; although an important aspect of the project was to develop young people's skills, confidence, and aspirations, we were all driven by a desire for change that addressed the structural barriers encountered. Both Harry and Sarah felt that the development of video CVs would be an important opportunity to not only raise awareness but also challenge negative perceptions surrounding young disabled people's capabilities. The project aimed to address one of the key barriers young disabled people face when entering the world of work, the recruitment process. By exploring one of the barriers, we are seeking to move beyond the individual and instead focus on changing the conditions of the labour market (MacIntyre 2014). Not having access to work opportunities can lead to young people experiencing poor health, being socially excluded, and lower job satisfaction in later life (Scanlon and Doyle 2021). On the other hand, employment is linked to better health outcomes, higher social status, and increased economic well-being (Sayce 2011). In addition, work plays a key role in building relationships and provides young disabled people with the opportunity to be part of the community which helps to promote positive self-identities (Bates et al. 2017). Young people with a learning disability have a desire to work and possess the skills necessary to succeed with appropriate support (Giri et al. 2022); however, this initial barrier can deter them from even applying, exacerbating the gap in disability employment further. This project aimed to explore how we might address this barrier by drawing on the art form of comedy.

### **Comedy, Disabled Young People, and Social Change.**

Since 2002, CT has been delivering community-centred workshop programmes to support the personal and social growth of the public through the art form of comedy. Research highlights the many benefits for young people of taking part in the arts; however, this tends to focus on music, drama, dance, singing, and visual arts (Lee et al. 2020; Wang et al. 2020; Zarobe and Bungay 2017). Although rather

limited, there is a growing body of evidence which highlights the positive impact that humour can have on an individual's health and well-being (Crawford and Caltabiano 2011; Twardzicki and Jones 2017). For young people, taking part in an arts-based programme gives them the opportunity to build confidence and self-esteem and make social connections (Caslin and Davies 2022; Ennis and Tonkin 2018). We wanted to explore the role of comedy in supporting young people with learning disabilities to enter the world of work and how we can use humour and laughter to share their voices. Research highlights how comedy and humour can be a powerful mechanism for public engagement with social issues (Chattoo and Green-Barber 2021). Chattoo and Feldman's (2020) work on comedy and social change was central to our work. Like Chattoo and Feldman (2020), our definition of social change is deliberately broad and inclusive in order to consider the full spectrum of social change outcomes 'from raising awareness and changing attitudes at the individual level to macro-level shifts in social norms, media agendas, and institutional policy' (p. 23). A key part of this project was to explore how comedy can lead to social change thus enabling more young people to have employment opportunities.

We are also mindful of the impact comedy has when it is employed at the expense of oppressed groups such as disabled people (Shakespeare 1999). From the outset, we were clear that with this project, we wish to explore how laughter and humour can instead 'challenge the presence of prejudice' (Shakespeare 1999, p.10). Some of the biggest barriers encountered by young disabled people are negative attitudes, stereotypes, and assumptions (Bates, et al. 2017; Scanlon and Doyle 2021). With this project, we hope to challenge some of the negative stereotypes through the use of comedy. Humour and laughter can be powerful tools in the promotion of social justice and young disabled people's fight for equality. Anesi (2018, p. 727) highlights the potential of humour as an educational strategy, arguing that 'perhaps people can use humour to simultaneously advocate, entertain, and unsettle individuals and communities'. Harry summarises his experiences of working with the CT and how he feels comedy can help young people to talk about their experiences:

The reason why I believe comedy is so important is because it enlightens very difficult subjects especially when we are working with young people. It is a delight to challenge subjects through comedy as it brightens up the mood. It also makes you more open to conversations which I don't think that they would have. My experience working with The Comedy Trust is every single session that you would go into it would be a very relaxed atmosphere...especially when working with young people comedy is such a unique format to have. It's such a joy to work with comedy and experience comedy first hand, especially when touching on very different subjects. Comedy enlightens the room, makes everybody feel happy, makes everybody feel relaxed. It allows you to have those conversations which I don't think you would have, certainly I wouldn't have had them. The Comedy Trust it's just an amazing, amazing programme to be out there, yeah it's an amazing programme. Talking about the employment figures, talking about how it makes you feel...Well, actually what's the funny side to it. So that sort of comedy which is amazing to see and amazing to see young people talking about it, talking about mental health.

Mental health is not a funny subject, but yet through comedy it really allows people to open up and really allows people to be themselves.

The video CV programme was an opportunity for young people to develop new skills but also have space to recognise skills and abilities they already possess. However, central to this project was sharing the voices of young people. Harry's role as a young disability activist was key to the project; throughout, we were clear on the need to recognise young people as the experts, they have the lived experience which means we must be led by their voices (Caslin et al. 2022; Liddiard et al. 2018).

## Research Process

The video CV project was established in response to the growing concerns surrounding the unemployment rates of young disabled people. Through the first-hand experience of both Harry and Sarah, in her role supporting young disabled people at school, we discovered a need to promote more inclusive practice within the recruitment process. Three key aims were identified at the outset of the project:

1. Explore new and creative ways of capturing young people's skills and communicating their abilities to employers
2. Enhance young people's confidence and self-belief in their abilities through the delivery of the Comedy Trust programme
3. Explore the use of comedy to share the messages of young people

The CT programme took place over the course of an academic year in a Special School located in a city centre in the Northwest of England. All the young people were either on or due to start a Supported Internship. During the course, 11 young people aged between 16 and 20 years old had the opportunity to take part in a range of comedy-based activities to help them develop their own video CV. The activities included the creation of one-page profiles, drama games to highlight personal skills, confidence building, public speaking, group work, storyboarding, filming and green-screen, editing skills, where to host your CV workshop, led by Harry, and a watch party of CVs (this was an end of project celebration where young people showcased their CVs).

When working 'with' not 'on' young people, it is essential that you develop research approaches which are creative, accessible, and responsive to the needs of the young people with whom you are working with (Caslin and Davies 2022). Comedy, games, and laughter were important features of the research processes for this project. Lockyer and Weaver (2022) highlight the benefits of using humour and comedy as part of data collection. For example, they argue that it provides a space to discuss difficult topics and can also help establish trusting relationships. This is further supported by Libera (2020, p. 605) who suggests that 'laughter is inherently social and shared laughter creates more points of connection'. As part of the activities, young people were encouraged to draw on the social model; emphasis was placed on how we can move beyond the individual to

work together to ensure the world of work is inclusive and accessible. For example, playing games such as role-playing the worst interview provided space for young people to connect with each other using humour and laughter to highlight discriminatory practices which could then be used as a discussion point for the research. Researchers have acknowledged how playing games has the potential to be a useful element of the researcher's toolkit (Neag 2019). Stenius et al. (2022) argue that adults should take advantage of humour as a form of young people's expression, particularly when playing games.

A further essential part of this project was ensuring young disabled people are heard, and it is important for us to reflect on the approaches we employed throughout the project. Whilst we recognise that accessible research methods are key to ensure all participants can contribute, these alone are not enough. Research needs to be based on questions that really matter to disabled young people (Curran et al. 2021). Every aspect of the research had to be driven by young people; they were involved at every stage of the research process from determining the focus of the research, the methods to be employed, and how we shared the results (Tuffrey Wijne et al. 2020).

Throughout the study, ethical considerations were of the utmost importance. The study gained ethical approval from Liverpool Hope University Ethics Committee and adhered to BERA (2018) guidelines throughout. In a study of this nature the issues around power relations are significant, and we will reflect on the ethical issues in our discussion of the principles of co-production below. Co-production is a widely recognised approach to research which is being increasingly employed in projects that involve young disabled people (Curran et al. 2021; Liddiard et al. 2018). Hickey and colleagues' (2018) principles of co-production proved a useful starting point, and we wanted to consider how we could apply these to our work. Although the team considered the principles to be extremely helpful, Harry felt it was important to add some additional principles which specifically related to working with young disabled people. There is a need to be cautious here and pause to reflect on the tensions and dilemmas that surround co-produced research with young disabled people (Caslin 2023; Curran et al. 2021; Liddiard et al. 2018). We continuously reflected on our own positionality throughout the project and the ways in which we may inadvertently silence the voices of young disabled people (Caslin 2023). Here, it was particularly important to provide space for young people to tell us when something was not working (Table 1). Harry and all the young people involved played a key role in ensuring that we developed approaches that are flexible, creative, and responsive to the needs of young people with learning disabilities.

The research team attended every session, and the young people were continuously given opportunities to provide feedback on how things were progressing. Throughout the research, 'data' took many formats, including the use of Post-it Notes, storyboards, conversations, posters, games, and video CVs (Dunn and Mellor 2017). Due to the nature of the research, data production and analysis were an ongoing process, and we worked collaboratively with the young people to make meaning of the data (O'Brien and Dadswell 2020; Smithson and Jones 2021). Once the students had finished making their video CVs, we met with them to play a series of games to identify themes that we felt were important to share as part of the research.

**Table 1** Applying the principles of co-production

Principles of co-production	What does this mean for young disabled people	How did we apply this principle to our work
Sharing of power	<p>Speak to young people and ask them what they want. Make sure they understand everything that is happening. Ensure they know that we need them and that we cannot do this project without them. It is really important to share all decisions with young people and let them take the lead in all research processes</p>	<p>This was tricky to achieve given that most of the research took place in a school environment. There is wide acknowledgement of the difficulties encountered when attempting to empower young people within such adult-controlled spaces (Caslin 2023). Whilst we recognise that it may not be possible to completely overcome all the inherent power imbalances, we ensured all young people were involved in decision-making. For example, we asked who we should talk to about the project</p>
Including all perspectives and skills	<p>Spend time getting to know the young people and learn what skills they have and nurture those skills. Ensure everyone has a role in the research, for example, some young people like to take photographs, and this can be used as a method to capture the research process. Acknowledging the lived experience of young people is essential; the project must be driven by their wants and needs</p>	<p>From the outset, we knew we wanted to be guided by young people in terms of how they wanted to participate and share their stories; however, it became apparent that this can be quite overwhelming if it is left too open. We recognise that a 'one size fits all' approach is deemed inappropriate as this can undermine the experiences of young people (Dunn and Mellor 2017). Therefore, young people were provided with a range of different approaches that draw on the CT work including storyboards, games, and photographs</p>
Respecting and valuing knowledge of all those working together on the research	<p>Make sure you are listening and engaged with the young people; you must ask what they want. Harry also highlighted the importance of checking the young people's mental health; always make sure they are comfortable and give them the opportunity to not participate if they do not want to. Throughout the project, ensure young people feel valued and make sure to emphasise that they are the expert</p>	<p>The study adopted 'process consent' with consent being negotiated as an ongoing concern throughout the research process (Heath et al. 2004). The young people were provided with ongoing opportunities to agree to continue or withdraw at any stage (O'Reilly and Dogra 2017). During each session, young people were asked if they were still happy to be part of the project. There were occasions when young people did not want to participate in an activity, and this was agreed. It was essential that they were in control and that we continually checked in and regularly reinforced that they are the expert and how important they were to the project</p>

Table 1 (continued)

Principles of co-production	What does this mean for young disabled people	How did we apply this principle to our work
Reciprocity	It is considered important to hold some sort of celebratory event to acknowledge the work of the young people and that the young people should take a lead in deciding what we do. We also feel it is important to share the work through a range of outputs, not just traditional academic outputs, for example, putting the work on display for young people to see. It is essential that we consider accessibility when sharing the project. This helps to ensure that young people feel valued	Ensuring young people benefit from the research was key. At the end of the project, each young person received a personal reference, a certificate of achievement, as well as having the opportunity to create their own video CV. It was also important to think about how we shared the work. We recognise the specific criticisms that have been made of traditional research dissemination, and we felt it was important to consider how messages were shared. Therefore, we adopted a range of approaches which included more traditional methods such as conference presentations and journal articles but also included accessible summaries and informal events
Building and maintaining relationships	Trust is considered essential, and to build trust, you need to spend time getting to know young people prior to any research taking place. To help achieve this, open up conversations and find things in common with young people. We feel the games introduced by CT can really help with building and maintaining relationships	Prior to any data collection taking place, the research team spent time getting to know the individual participants to establish trust. The research team also attended all the sessions with the young people and participated in the games and activities to help build relationships
Additional principles added by Harry		
Time	If people have had bad experiences, it can take time to develop trusting relationships. There needs to be flexibility in our understanding of time. Harry's role as someone who has gone through the programme was felt to be particularly important here as he is somebody who might have similar experiences	We knew from the start that to make this project meaningful, we needed to invest time not just in the relationships but also in our understanding of time for the activities. Not all activities will be completed at the same time and, as Harry highlights, flexibility was key to this project



**Table 1** (continued)

Principles of co-production	What does this mean for young disabled people	How did we apply this principle to our work
Accessibility	<p>Respect everybody's access needs. Ensure that everything is in place, so everyone can participate. For example, it is essential to consider practical things such as personal assistants, taxis, that all information is accessible, and that the space is accessible. Consider how young people can get there and be involved</p>	<p>Here, working closely with the school was essential. They know all the young people really well and made sure they had everything in place to participate during the programme and the events. We did encounter access issues during the event such as paths not being clear for wheelchair users. These issues were reported but highlight that there are still lots of spaces that are not accessible. Unfortunately, we have encountered issues in finding spaces that can accommodate all of the needs of the young people</p>
Support	<p>Listen to how the young people want to engage. Ensure you have access to and have read young people's support plans in preparation. Make sure everything is in place that the young people need. Respect their support and medical needs and ensure you have the right people in the room to help with any situation that may arise</p>	<p>Being led by the young people and those who work closely with them was essential. Young people would be joined by support staff, who also joined in the activities and games. Comedy proved to be a particularly useful way of bringing everyone together</p>
Be prepared for the unexpected	<p>Harry felt that it is essential we reflect on the lessons learnt from COVID. Recognise that there will be lots going on for the young people and consider ways to ensure the young people feel secure and safe. There will be a diversity of needs and circumstances. Plan for everything knowing that nothing goes to plan. Be prepared to switch plans. Young people may not be able to participate sometimes, respect that</p>	<p>There were occasions when young people were not able to attend sessions. The approach we adopted meant that young people were able to dip in and out of the project. There were instances when they did not want to participate, and this was always respected</p>
Flexibility	<p>Plan to be flexible—with time and activities if something happens make sure you have the time to adjust the planned activities</p>	<p>Each of the sessions was led by a CT practitioner who has vast experience of working with diverse groups of young people. Although there was an idea of what would be covered, the practitioner was responsive to the group and would adjust the sessions to meet the needs of the group</p>

### 3. Findings

The findings will be split into two sections. The first section will explore the young people's experiences of the CT programme. The second section will provide an overview of the key findings from our experiences of sharing the work and highlight the benefits of drawing on the art form of comedy to disseminate the project.

#### The Comedy Trust Programme

Three key themes were identified from the data collected throughout the duration of the course and the games at the end.

#### Showing People What They Can Do

An important part of the project was drawing on comedy to enable young people to recognise what they can do and to develop their confidence and self-esteem (Caslin and Davies 2022; Janhonen 2017). The young people felt that having the opportunity to make their own video CV would help them show off their skills and abilities.

*'It's better having a video CV, because you can see it, it's not just written down' Student 6*

*'It shows what things you've been up to and what kind of thing you'd be doing in a job' Student 3*

*'I think it was useful for me going into the workplace in the future because they can see what I can do...Well anything can be written on a cv, and you know a video one you can see me doing it. You can tell I'm not lying then can't you!' Student 4*

It is interesting to note that within quotes, there is a suggestion that employers may question a young person's ability. This came up in several of our sessions. There is a plethora of research which highlights how negative preconceptions can have a detrimental impact on the opportunities afforded to young disabled people (Bates, et al. 2017; Scanlon and Doyle 2021). The young people who took part in the programme highlighted the importance of challenging such negative perceptions.

#### Challenging Perceptions

Central to the project was ensuring we were led by young people's voices. As highlighted by Liddiard et al. (2018), providing space for young people to reflect on and discuss their lived experience of both disability and dis/ableism allows you the opportunity to gain an insider perspective on the barriers that are encountered and more importantly how these can be addressed.

*'I liked all of it, filming it stands out because you got to see what I was good at...some people might not think it is easy for wheelchair users but I made it look easy' – Student 1*

We felt it was essential for young people to take a lead on deciding what should be filmed. All the young people wanted to be filmed in a workplace and, as they were on Supported Internships, we were able to film them at work. As noted earlier, these were seen as a key mechanism in providing young people with work experience. In addition to deciding the location of the video CV, they also had the final say on how they were represented, for example being happy in their role.

*'I liked that video of me in the café, that's good because it's a good set, it had scenes I remembered when you videoed me on your camera making teas. I loved it so much. Really good. Fantastic. Showed me happy and excited about it. I liked everything about it.' – Student 5*

## **Playing Games**

Laughter and humour were present during each of the sessions, and the young people particularly highlighted that they enjoyed playing the games. As noted in the literature, games can help to establish trusting relationships and enable young people to express themselves (Neag 2019; Stenius et al. 2022). For both the young people and the research team, games played a key part in the research process. They also helped the young people to feel more confident when being filmed.

*'I liked when we played the games (in workshop sessions). It was alright being filmed, don't know if I was confident but because we played games and know each other, now I feel confident' – Student 6*

We all felt it was extremely important to share the work that had been done as part of the project. We knew we wanted to raise awareness of the importance of developing inclusive recruitment practices, so we decided to host an interactive event. We invited people from the local community who might be in a position to influence change. We also wanted to capture the responses to our work and so asked attendees to complete a short questionnaire which asked for their feedback on the video CVs and on the event. We knew we wanted to incorporate the fun and laughter that had been a key part of the project and so we developed some games to not only engage the audience but also be part of our data.

## **Breaking Down Barriers Dissemination Event**

In the summer of 2022, we hosted the Breaking Down Barriers event at Liverpool Hope University. A flyer for the event was shared via social media, and 50 people attended. An overview of who attended is provided in Table 2 below.

A key part of the event was to provide space for adults and young people to work together to consider how we might address some of the barriers that are experienced by young people with a learning disability when entering the world of work. To help

**Table 2** Event attendees

Organisation	Number
Liverpool Hope University	1 university academic; 3 undergraduate student assistants; 1 employability team member
The Comedy Trust	2
Charity Organisations	4
Local SEN/D schools	20 young people + 7 staff
Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)	8
Job Centre	2
City Region Careers Hub	1
Recruitment Agency	1
	50 Total

us achieve this, we employed a range of comedy techniques including playing games and sharing stories. In this section, we will draw on Chattoo and Feldman's (2020) work on comedy's four social change influences on audiences.

1. Increasing attention
2. Disarming audiences and lowering resistance to persuasion
3. Breaking down social barriers
4. Stimulating and sharing discussion

### Increasing Attention

The purpose of the event was to showcase the young people's video CVs. Chattoo and Feldman (2020) suggest that one of the biggest challenges to public engagement is getting people to pay attention. All of the attendees had a very positive response to the videos, and we hoped by using humour to introduce them may lead some to consider changing their own practice.

Yes, how interactive CVs can support people with SEN needs to shine.  
Excellent way of showing skills.

We would have liked to have seen more employers attend the event, and some of the participants also felt it would have been beneficial for employers to hear about the project.

Interactive CVs are an excellent idea. Would have been good to see more employers attend the event.

Participants also highlighted some of the potential issues with video CVs.

Really fantastic idea. I like the fact that you could see the young people at work. Questions would be how to send? How would employers store the CVs how to keep CVs up-to-date?

Fantastic idea. An accessible CV is perfect for my young people. Staff training in schools on this subject may be needed.

A great idea a lot of organisations will need to consider how to store and accept the videos but if the option for accessible CVs became standard practice it would be no issue at all.

I think accessible CVs were a great idea but we are ahead of general recruitment times especially large recruitment companies.

We were really pleased with the overwhelmingly positive response to the video CVs. The concerns raised here reinforce the argument that it is the conditions of the labour market which need to change (MacIntyre 2014) to ensure we have more inclusive recruitment processes.

### **Disarming Audiences and Lowering Resistance to Persuasion**

During the event, we wanted to make sure young people had the opportunity to discuss their experiences with people in a position to influence change. Chattoo and Feldman highlight (2020, p. 45) ‘because of positive emotions elicited by humour audiences may be more willing to engage with threatening information when it is presented in a humorous context’. By using humour throughout the event, we hoped to lower the audience’s resistance to potentially challenging messages especially when it led to participants being made aware of how their own practice may lead to disablement. The event was hosted by a CT practitioner and having a comedian interacting and engaging the audience helped to put the audience at ease. We wanted to explore the role humour can play as an educational strategy to share our work (Anesi 2018). However, laughter was not the only reaction we were seeking from the audience. We also wanted them to think and reflect on the issues that were raised during the event (Pinto et al. 2015). We started with a game of higher or lower using employment statistics for disabled people. Harry also used humour to share his messages. For example, he made a joke about wanting to pay taxes, but this has a serious message behind it. All of the attendees had the opportunity to hear directly from young people, and this was something everyone found beneficial.

FaceTime and experiences of people with disabilities, understanding their perspective and what support they would like.

For Harry, humour can be used as a powerful mechanism to defuse potentially awkward situations, for example highlighting issues around access. We hoped to use comedy to increase awareness and a key way we sought to achieve this was to focus on the voices of young people.

### **Breaking Down Social Barriers**

We hoped to break down the social barriers encountered by young people and to do this, we needed to be led by their voices. Chattoo and Feldman (2020) draw on the contact hypothesis which suggests that positive interactions between members of diverse social groups can reduce prejudice, by providing the opportunity to hear

from groups who experience discrimination. From our experiences of working with young people, we felt that games had been a particularly useful tool for enabling young people to talk about their barriers and their aspirations (Neag 2019; Stenius et al. 2022). We wanted to try to replicate this during the event. One of the activities involved the attendees being put into groups with young people to play a game of snakes and ladders (the snakes were the barriers, for example not having accessible information, and the ladders were the opportunities, for example providing work experience). Throughout the project, we aimed to move beyond the individual to look at the impact of social structures (Pearson et al. 2021; Bates et al. 2017); the games provided space for young people to highlight to the attendees the barriers they encountered when looking to enter the world of work.

*Snakes and ladders because it got me talking about my barriers. (young person)*

*Listening to others' ideas and barriers. (young person)*

Listening to all the ideas and communicating with other people. *(young person)*

Coming down and talking about all the staff. Liked the games and the staff. *(young person)*

I enjoyed the games. *(young person)*

Playing games and meeting new people. *(young person)*.

Play snakes and ladders with different people.

Engaging with young people and discovering the barriers that they face and opportunities to overcome them.

Listening to the young people speaking about their experiences.

I love talking to the young people and how much this event gives them a voice on this important subject.

It was clear during the event that both young people and the attendees really enjoyed having the opportunity to talk to each other to think about how we work together to ensure more young people with learning disabilities have opportunities to work.

### Stimulating Sharing and Discussion

As noted, a key part of the event was to provide opportunities for different perspectives to come together and discuss the barriers that are experienced by young people with learning disabilities. Whilst playing the game of snakes and ladders, each group was able to identify a series of both barriers and opportunities. From the data collected during this game, we were able to identify a series of key messages from our work to enable more disabled young people access to work.

1. Opportunities for work experience—all of the attendees felt it was important for young people to have the opportunity to go into workspaces. Supported Internships were identified as a key mechanism for achieving this.

2. Listen to the voices of young people—in order to address the barriers encountered by young disabled people and ensure work environments are inclusive and accessible, you need to provide space for their voices to be heard.
3. Job coaches were highlighted as playing a vital role in ensuring young people have access to the workplace. It is important to recognise that some young disabled people will require support to succeed in the workplace. Those who attended the event and also work with young disabled people highlighted the need to hire more job coaches.
4. Challenge negative perceptions—an important part of this project was to showcase the skills and abilities of young disabled people. This is in response to our awareness that negative attitudes and perceptions are a significant barrier. We need to challenge employers' preconceived notions of what it means to hire a disabled young person and move the conversation towards the benefits of hiring disabled young people.
5. Raising awareness of support for employers—one of the concerns raised was that employers are not aware of the support that is available to them to enable them to provide opportunities for disabled young people.
6. Provide accessible information for young people and their families—ensure young people and their families/carers understand their options and what opportunities are available to them as they transition into adulthood.

We see this as only being the start of the project. We are all aware of the importance of keeping the conversations going, and this was also reflected by the people who attended the event. We now need to think about how we continue to build on the work.

Need events like these for more mainstream businesses, to become involved and to be informed and change their perceptions about disabled people, think about what they can do and not what they can't do.

A great event. I think an event for staff in schools would be needed to make sure everyone is on the same page. Even just talking about positive inclusive language.

## Discussion

Young people with a learning disability have a desire to work and obtain the skills necessary to succeed with appropriate support, yet they still encounter many barriers, and these start with the recruitment process. Although video CVs appear to be a useful tool to demonstrate what young people can do, we are yet to see whether this will lead to any long-term change. This project also highlights the extra burden that is placed on young disabled people to showcase what they can do in order to prove their bodies align with normative work expectations. Here, the social model played a key role in empowering the young people to collectively work together to challenge some of the misconceptions and importantly recognise the changes that need to be made to the workplace to ensure it is accessible to everyone. Comedy helped

young people to not only recognise the skills they already possess but also share the work and highlight their stories. We are keen to continue to develop this work and in particular, will seek to work closely with employers to consider how we can address some of the concerns about the long-term employment of video CVs. There are still questions we need to address, for example how these can be stored, shared, and updated on a regular basis. We feel it is important for employers, schools, and young people to work together to consider how we can overcome barriers and strive for change leading to more inclusive and accessible recruitment processes. We also acknowledge the importance of ensuring young people are supported appropriately. We feel that when young people with learning disabilities are provided with opportunities to work, it not only benefits them but also the wider community. Central to this project was the young people having the opportunity to go into workplaces to film their video CVs, and the route in for all of the students was Supported Internships. It is vital that employers are made aware of the support that is available to them through schemes like Supported Internships and, by highlighting the voices of young people, we can challenge some of the negative stereotypes and instead focus on what can be gained by employing a disabled young person.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The findings are based on a relatively small number of participants, where the emphasis was placed on gaining a detailed and in-depth insight into how the young people experienced the programme and our experiences of sharing our work (Schoch 2020). The study does not seek to make generalisations, and it is important that the reader is aware that this paper only provides a snapshot. The paper seeks to highlight the importance of working together to address the barriers that are encountered by young disabled people when entering the world of work and the need to develop more inclusive recruitment processes which move beyond the individual and instead change the conditions of the labour market (MacIntyre 2014). Such research intends to provide an account of the specific situation that gets 'sufficiently close to its underlying structure to enable others to see potential similarities with other situations' (Winter 2000: 1). Working 'with' rather than 'on' young disabled people was central to this project, and Harry played a key role in ensuring that we were led by the voices of the young people we were working with. By establishing our principles of co-production, we were able to ensure our work was accessible, creative, and responsive to the needs of the young people. It is important to reiterate that although these enabled us to reflect on our research process, we see these as only being a starting point and as such should be amended and adopted so they can be tailored to meet the needs of the young people you are working with.

By drawing on the art form of comedy, we were able to engage audiences with this project. Our ultimate goal is to see more young disabled people having access to the world of work, and through the use of humour and laughter, we hoped to challenge perceptions leading to social change. As noted earlier in this paper, how we define social change is deliberately broad to include raising awareness and changing attitudes at an individual level to organisational and wider societal changes (Chattoo and Feldman 2020). By starting with the individuals who attended the event, we hope that we will start a ripple effect in the development of more inclusive and accessible recruitment processes for disabled young people.



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## Declarations

**Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate.** The research involves human participants, and ethical approval was obtained from the Liverpool Hope University Ethics Committee. We also adhered to the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) guidelines throughout. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were made aware of their right to withdraw.

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

We confirm that this work is original and has not been published elsewhere, nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere.

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