

5.2 Shannon's story (aged 16): exploring the world of work

Shannon is on the autistic spectrum and attends a school for pupils with Severe (NI) Learning Difficulties (SLD). Shannon transferred from the Moderate (NI) Learning Difficulties sector last year and has just moved into the leavers' department (sixth form). Shannon is one of six pupils with ASD in this department. Shannon and the teacher in her new class had only communicated in the past about her excellent drawings or to greet each other in passing.

The teacher managed on the third attempt to chat to Shannon, though she did not ask her what she would like to do after she left this school in case it caused her undue anxiety. She initiated the conversation by asking what she liked best about school.

Shannon highlighted the fact that she liked her friends, going into detail about their different personalities and listing them in an analytical way. The teacher fast-forwarded to the main question; she asked what she wanted to do in the future, and nearly brought the conversation to an abrupt end when Shannon stated, 'Don't you know? I'm a now girl. I do not think about the future.' She continued to stare intently at the teacher with arms folded.

The teacher mentally struggled to restructure the question in order to rescue the conversation and move on. Shannon declared that her mother had said that she could be a chambermaid but Shannon added disdainfully that she did not want to clean up other people's dirt. In response to the question as to what did interest her, she said she was very worried about birds dying of bird flu. The teacher linked this interest to having an interest in animals and referred to jobs such as dog walking or grooming. This idea was met with total disdain. Her arms remained folded and her stare intensified. She stated that she had 'obsessive compulsive disorder'.

The Sixth Form Department Head joined in and stressed that Shannon was working on this issue and was doing very well. Shannon added that it was all part of her Asperger's Syndrome. She recited that this meant that she had to work hard at not being obsessive, being sociable, listening to others and waiting and listening while others talked. The bell rang for dinner and, at this, Shannon concluded that this was why she was a 'now girl'.

What the teacher / school did to help Shannon

The school maintains a leavers' programme which provides opportunities for the pupils to develop their personal and interpersonal skills as well as aptitudes considered essential for participation in personal, social and economic life in the community today.

- Shannon was given access to a broad and relevant practical programme and an overall individual programme was created based on an assessment of her needs, particularly her anxieties and her issues around travelling alone.

- The school made contact with the relevant health authority to support Shannon's transfer from school and the teacher secured a work-experience programme supported by the employment support officer.
- Shannon's first job contract is planned within the school and involves the delivery of roll books from her sixth form department to the office, progressing to include external buildings on the school site. Her responsibilities are graded, structured and paced to suit her. Given that the school is committed to recycling, a further job opportunity in a conservation scheme is planned for Shannon.
- Plans were also made for Shannon to attend the local Further and Higher Education College one day each week where she has chosen the option of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and is working towards gaining an accreditation.
- Shannon is also participating in the school's Occupational Studies Programme which is a work-related accredited programme, and can be continued after she leaves the school.
- The school is also piloting an Education for Employability Programme providing Shannon with the opportunity to add to her career portfolio.
- Team Enterprise is another school programme designed to equip Shannon with 'real world' work skills, by learning to design, make and sell decorative wooden products.

In her final year, Shannon will have 'an evening' when she will receive a Record of Achievements portfolio, celebrating her achievements with her family and friends. No doubt Shannon will have had many experiences and will receive a unique and interesting portfolio of achievements, when her time comes. All those who have met her on the way will hold very special memories and will be the richer for the experience.

Key learning points from Shannon's story

- Leaving school will be stressful for pupils and parents alike
- Planning should begin well in advance
- Involving key people is the way to best practice
- Accessing the support of the careers service and the local FE college is helpful
- Assessing the pupil's interests and abilities is very important
- Thinking about health and safety issues will give a sense of security to both the pupil and the parents
- A school leavers' programme should focus on lifelong learning
- It is important to celebrate achievement

