

## **The Impact of Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH) for Children and Young People**

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## **The impact of Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH) for children and young people**

This small-scale research project investigated the impact of a Person-Centred Planning (PCP) tool - Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH) - with children and young people (CYP) with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in mainstream settings. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the perceived impact of the PATH process for three secondary-aged male students, three parents and the member of school staff who conducted the students' PATH. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, which resulted in four main themes: usefulness of the graphic, positive effects, child-centeredness, and possible barriers to successful implementation. PATH was described as having a variety of useful benefits, such as increasing CYP's confidence and motivation. In addition, barriers to successful implementation of PATH were identified by participants, which in turn may limit its impact. In particular, families and children identified that they would benefit from receiving additional information and guidance about the process before the meeting to maximise its utility.

Keywords: Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope; PATH; person-centred planning; PCP; voice;

Person-centred planning (PCP) is an approach to life planning used across education, health and social care (Claes, Van Hove, Vandeveldel, van Loon & Schalock, 2010; Robertson et al., 2007). The theoretical frameworks of humanistic and positive psychology underpin PCP approaches (Joseph & Murphy, 2013; White & Rae, 2016). Humanistic psychology focuses on the individual's quality of life, as well as their growth and development (Schneider, Pierson & Bugental, 2014), while positive psychology focuses on strengths that enable an individual to thrive (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Accordingly, PCP aims to create meaningful change for individuals by putting their aspirations and wishes at the forefront of a decision-making processes. Theoretically, this may lead to better adherence and outcomes than other methods of planning and assessment, which often focus on the deficiencies and limitations of individuals with disabilities (Billington, McNally & McNally, 2000; Mansell & Beadle-Brown, 2004; Robertson et al., 2007). The focus in PCP upon the voice of individual service users, rather than the professional, reflects a belief that the needs and wishes of these individuals may be lost in the system (Holburn, 1997). Consequently, if not meaningfully included in the process, service users may feel as if they have very little involvement in decisions affecting them (Department of Health [DoH], 2001). Another distinctive aspect of PCP is the inclusion and utilisation of service users' families, who play a vital supporting role through attending and actively participating in the PCP meeting (Mansell & Beadle-Brown, 2004). It is important to note that for the purposes of this research, the term 'PCP' is used to refer to Person Centred Planning and *not* Personal Construct Psychology (Kelly, 1955).

The current research focuses upon the use of a particular PCP tool - Promoting Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH, Pearpoint, O'Brien, & Forest, 1993) - with children and young people (CYP) with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). PATH is one of the most common PCP tools (Claes, Van Hove, Vandeveldel, van Loon & Schalock, 2010) and is recommended by the DoH (2010) as one of the four main PCP

approaches. PCP features strongly in the SEND and Disability Code of Practice (Department for Education [DfE], DoH, 2014), which provides statutory guidance for organisations who work with CYP with SEND. For example, it states that ‘children and young people and their parents or carers will be fully involved in decisions about their support and what they want to achieve’ (DfE, DoH, 2014, p. 11). The 2014 Code of Practice also requires that assessment and planning are based upon the strengths and capabilities of CYP (White & Rae, 2016).

PATH involves the creation of a positive future through solution-focused questioning, with the aim of creating a colourful visual representation – or ‘graphic’ - of future dreams and visions (Bristow, 2013). PATH meetings are led by two facilitators, often educational psychologists (EPs). One facilitator takes the lead in eliciting aspirations, whilst the other records each step of the process graphically. If able to communicate their views, the individual for whom the plan is being developed attends and contributes. If this is not possible, then a professional such as a learning mentor who knows the individual well can speak on their behalf. In addition, the meeting should also include parent(s) or carer(s), as well as relevant professionals from education, health or social services (Bristow, 2013). The PATH process typically consists of six steps, working backwards from the young person’s future dreams towards the present. Actions and targets are then collaboratively agreed which may help the student to achieve their goals (Pearpoint et al., 1993).

Despite the governmental recommendations discussed above, the evidence for the effectiveness of PCP approaches in general, and PATH in particular, is limited. Although a small number of studies have reported positive findings, the majority of these are not directly relevant to CYP with SEND, the focus of this research. Instead, the focus has tended to be on adults (Armstrong & Dorsett, 2015; Morgan, 2016; Nelson, 1999; Walton & Dennison, 2015) or cross-cultural comparisons (Trainor, 2007). To date, only two studies, neither of which have been peer-reviewed, have investigated the use of PATH with CYP with SEND in the

U.K. (Bristow, 2013; Philp & Brown, 2017). Owing to the limited amount of available research, relevant studies from the broader PCP literature will also be examined.

Claes et al., (2010) conducted the first systematic review of studies employing PCP for CYP and adults with intellectual disability. They examined their methodological quality by using ‘widely used’ checklists: Downs and Black (1998) for quantitative studies and Cesario, Morin, and Santa-Donato (2002) for those employing qualitative methodologies. In addition, outcome effectiveness was investigated using a rating scale developed by Prout and Nowak-Drabik (2003). Based upon the 15 studies reviewed, it was concluded that ‘planning has a positive, but moderate, impact on personal outcomes for this population. The body of evidence provided in this review is weak with regard to criteria for evidence-based research’ (Claes et al., 2010, p. 432). A number of limitations of the studies examined were discussed; for example, many of the PCP meetings were described as ‘paper exercises’, unrelated to the lives of service-users and excluding family members or relevant professionals. In addition, concerns were raised that plans were not implemented and that participants did not understand the process. It is therefore important for research to examine the implementation of PCP plans from the perspective of service-users and their families and to ascertain their understanding of the process. In addition to individuals with an intellectual disability, it would also be useful to include perspectives from service-users across all ability levels, including CYP with other types of SEND:

In an earlier study, Kueneman and Freeze (1997) found that parents and teachers of students (average age = 17.5 years) with ‘cognitive and severe physical disability’ were ‘highly satisfied’ with the plan and implementation of a PATH transition meeting in which they had recently participated. Although the views of families were considered, it would be useful for future research to investigate whether similar positive findings occur with younger

students with less severe difficulties. In addition, studies should include individuals who had participated in the PATH process.

Building upon the limitations addressed above, White and Rae (2016) employed a mixed-methods methodology to investigate the views of CYP and their families who recently had participated in person-centred reviews [PCR] (Sanderson, Mathieson, & Erwin, 2006). PCRs are a PCP technique often used in the review of CYP with SEND. Like PATH, visual techniques are central to the process; stakeholders (defined as any individual invested in the success of the student, such as family members, teachers, and external professionals) answer questions (such as ‘what is working well?’) about the CYP on large sheets of paper, which can be seen by everyone in the room. Thematic analysis, based upon interview data, was employed to explore their views. A mixture of questionnaires and scaling questions were also administered to investigate changes in the student’s locus of control, feelings towards school, control, motivation and the extent to which the young person felt listened to. The results indicated that CYP and their families were mainly positive about PCRs, which were described as a ‘collaborative, constructing and reassuring process for families where a wealth of information is shared openly and honestly within a relaxed, yet structured, meeting’ (White & Rae, 2016, p. 38). Despite the positive findings, the themes identified predominately reflected the process, rather than outcome. The quantitative aspect of the study found ‘no meaningful change’, which may reflect the fact that longer-term outcomes were not considered.

Conversely, Philp and Brown (2017) included longer-term outcomes in their investigation of the use of PATH by EPs within a Scottish special school. Upper-school staff were trained on both the philosophy of PCP and the implementation of PATH. The young participants talked positively about the process ‘several’ months later. They also reported that it had aided them in remembering targets. Teachers reported that the students were more

confident when tackling novel and difficult tasks. Very little detail of the study is provided and therefore it is not possible to evaluate its methodological quality; consequently it only offers weak evidence in support of PATH. Future research, employing and reporting methodologically sound designs, is needed to further evaluate its use.

Bristow (2013) explored the views of CYP, their family, school staff, PATH facilitators and decision makers (such as senior school staff) who had recently been involved in a PATH meeting. The results indicated that CYP and their parents felt their voices had been heard and that they had contributed to the process. In addition, improvements in parent-school and parent-child relationships were reported. Finally, students felt greater confidence and motivation to achieve their goals, attributed to the PATH process. The CYP in this study were classified as ‘vulnerable and challenging’ and were not attending mainstream provision. Accordingly, future research would benefit from studies that aim to ascertain whether PATH would also have a similar positive impact for students from mainstream settings, as it is often used with students from these settings

PCP techniques – such as PATH – are widely employed in education (Claes et al., 2010; Sanderson, 2000), and PATH is often used by Educational Psychology Services to plan for CYP with SEND. However, as has been documented through a critical review of relevant literature, the evidence-base for PATH is limited. As scientist-practitioners, EPs should base their practice on sound psychological theory and good-quality evidence (Birch, Frederickson & Miller, 2015). Accordingly, the aim of the current research was to evaluate the impact of PATH for CYP with SEND from one local authority (LA) in the South of England. Building upon previous research (Bristow, 2013; Philp & Brown, 2017), this study was conducted with CYP from mainstream settings. In addition, longer-term impact was investigated through recruiting participants who participated in PATH up to 6 months previously. Finally, triangulation of information across informants was achieved through gaining the views of

CYP, their families and relevant school staff to understand the impact of PATH for the CYP involved.

## **Methods**

### ***Design***

Given the paucity of research directly investigating the impact of PATH, an inductive exploratory design was employed, with the aim of exploring participants' experiences of the PATH process. A qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate as – in accordance with the inductive exploratory approach – this gave primacy to the data (Holloway, 1997). A critical realist epistemological position was adopted for this piece of research. Critical realism assumes that a real world exists, but that this assumption cannot be proved or disproved; events occur as a result of mechanisms operating in the real world, even if researchers cannot directly observe the real domain in its entirety (Sayer, 1992). Observers experience events in the empirical – as opposed to real – domain. However, observation is fallible and may not lead to a full understanding of the phenomena in question (Easton, 2010). Accordingly, researchers should attempt to understand the same data through different lenses, in order to access, at least in part, features of the participants' real world (Woodside & Wilson, 2003). Qualitative methodologies are the typical starting point for critical realist research (Price & Martin, 2018), and in the present study, researchers conducted semi-structured interviews to understand the impact of PATH from the differing perspectives of students, their parents and a school staff member involved in the PATH process.

### ***Participants***

Purposive sampling was used to recruit three students with SEND who had undergone a PATH meeting in the last 6 months. Purposive sampling can be defined as the 'deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses' (Etikan, Musa, &



Alkassim, 2016). All students were male and aged between 11-16 years. In addition, one parent of each student, as well as a member of school staff who had facilitated their PATHs was recruited. In order to ensure all students were able to communicate their views, only students who did not identify as having significant speech, language or communication needs were included.

### ***Measures***

Semi-structured interviews were used to generate data to assess the participants' perspectives of the impact of PATH. General interview questions were generated by the research team, and an initial interview schedule devised. Following piloting of the initial interview schedule, these questions were then refined to a final interview schedule (consisting of eight open-ended questions) and adapted for the CYP, parents, and school staff (interviews are available from the corresponding author upon request).

### ***Procedure***

This research project was conducted in partnership with an Educational Psychology Service in the South of England who use PATH regularly. To recruit participants, the Principal Educational Psychologist of the Educational Psychology Service approached a secondary school who regularly use PATH, to provide information about the study and invite the school to participate. The Head Teacher agreed and provided written confirmation of this. A member of school staff responsible for SEND identified three eligible children; she approached their parents who provisionally agreed to participate. Informed written consent was gained from the school staff member and parents (for themselves and their children) prior to the interviews. In addition, student participants gave their assent; they were given an information sheet explaining what was involved in the study, which was read to them if they were not proficient readers, and they were asked if they were happy to take part.

One school staff member had undertaken all of the relevant PATH meetings and therefore it was not possible to recruit any additional school staff. One researcher interviewed the school staff member, one parent, and one student. Two other researchers interviewed one student and one parent each.

Researchers informed participants that they could stop at any time. In addition, the CYP were given a traffic light system to indicate how they were feeling: green if they were happy to continue, amber if they were unsure or anxious and red if they wished to stop. All participants were informed that the information they provided was confidential and they were debriefed when the interview had finished. The interviews were recorded on an audio recorder, transcribed and stored on a password-protected memory stick. Participant names and any other identifying information were removed from the transcriptions and the original recordings were destroyed.

### ***Data Analysis***

Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendations were adopted to analyse the data and to identify common perspectives across participants. The three researchers individually transcribed the data collected from the interviews they had themselves conducted. The transcripts were then shared across researchers who then read and re-read all of the interviews. This resulted in data immersion which supported a high level of familiarity with the data and aided the development of initial codes. Coding was inductive in nature and related to the whole data set. Inter-rater checks were conducted to support the consistency of coding across researchers.

During the next stage of analysis, the researchers worked together to search for and develop themes. This involved combining codes that appeared to reflect similar aspects within the data. A coding manual was used to match the codes to excerpts from the data. Patton's (1990)

dual criteria of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity was used to check that that the separate themes were distinctive and individually supported by coherent data. In accordance with a critical realist epistemology, the researchers aimed to move beyond description to identify themes at the interpretative level to identify any underlying assumptions informing participants' views (Boyatzis, 1998). Identified themes were then reviewed on multiple occasions and developed into a final coding manual and thematic map (Figure 1). Collectively, the research team defined and appropriately named the themes.

Moreover, the researchers adhered to Yardley's (2000) principles of ensuring quality in qualitative studies. For example, excerpts of text are presented to ensure 'transparency' so that the researchers' interpretations are clear and open to scrutiny; the corresponding author can also provide a coding manual and transcribed interview data upon request.

## **Results**

Four broad themes were identified from the analysis: usefulness of the graphic, positive effects of the PATH process, child-centeredness, and possible barriers to successful implementation. As can be seen from Figure 1, each theme contained a number of sub-themes. These were discussed and interpreted in accordance with the primary research question: What is the impact of PATH for the CYP involved?

Figure 1: Thematic map of four final themes (circles) and related sub-themes

[Figure 1 near here]

### ***Usefulness of the graphic***

All of the participants described that they found the graphic produced during the PATH process to be very useful: it represented the participants' views and was perceived to be

accessible. In addition, the visual reminded stakeholders of what was discussed during the PATH meeting, which the researchers interpreted as a ‘prompt’. For example:

*“X can always go back to it and look and say, ‘Ah’, that’s what...if he’s in doubt or anything I can go back to that and look at it and that’s the wonderful thing” (Parent 3).*

Parent 3 described how when his son was confused or in ‘doubt’, he could refer back to the graphic. The graphic therefore not only served as a reminder, but as a ‘wonderful thing’ that empowered parents to help support their child, a role which otherwise may have been taken on by the professional. This is in accordance with the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, DoH, 2014), which aims to involve CYP and their parents as fully as possible in the decision-making processes.

All of the participants also described using the graphic in ways that illustrate its accessibility. For example, by having a picture of it saved on phones or stuck in the back of textbooks:

*“That graphic ... there’s a print out of that in my son’s bag. Which he carries around with him with ... So it can be referred to anytime and I can get it out and refer to it and the school also have the copy and so, you know, you’ve both got it” (Parent 3).*

Moreover, both children and parents described how the visual was easier than text to refer to:

*“I’m not more of a read and write person because of my dyslexia” (Student 1).*

*“It’s visualising and for X, that’s what he needs ... Instead of it all written down like that you see I’m no good at that either” (Parent 1)*

Parent 1 described how ‘visualising’ is more accessible to both herself and son than something she would have to read. PATH can therefore be seen as removing a barrier to the participation of CYP and their families who find reading difficult or threatening. It is fundamentally important to remove barriers to participation, both morally and legally (Shevlin & Rose, 2008). Again, the impact of the PATH graphic can be interpreted as empowering key stakeholders to participate more fully in the decision-making process.

***Positive effects of the PATH process***

The majority of participants described positive effects that had resulted from the PATH process: CYP were reported to have benefited from more confidence and motivation, received more support in school, as well as gained a sense of direction. For example, Student 3 described how the PATH meeting helped him to forge career ambitions:

*“It’s realised what I want to do when I’m older and what I’m gonna do for like a job and stuff like that”* (Student 3).

Similarly, the parent of another student described how PATH helped her son prepare for the future:

*“Cause it showed him what’s in the future, preparing him what he can go for”*  
(Parent 1).

Interlinked with giving CYP a sense of direction, increases in motivation and confidence were also reported:

*“I’m confident now a lot more ‘cos I wasn’t confident when I first came so, to this school, so I am now”* (Student 3).

*“I also think that they were probably not very active in terms of their education and their engagement with education and we have had a little switch in their motivation so that’s really helpful”* (school staff member).

The increase in CYP’s motivation and confidence may be attributed to the sense of direction instilled through the PATH process. This is in accordance with the goal setting and self-efficacy literature (e.g., Locke & Latham, 2002; Wigfield & Wentzel, 2007); PATH may have led the CYP to believe they could achieve their goals (through supporting feelings of greater self-efficacy and confidence for example), which in turn may have led to an increase in their motivation (Wigfield & Wentzel, 2007). In accordance with goal theory, for example, the fact that the CYP’s goals (i.e., their future aspirations or career plans) are made specific and valued, may have also led to increased motivation (Locke & Latham, 2002). Taking this interpretation further, the increase in confidence and motivation may serve to further strengthen the CYP’s sense of direction. In short, there may be a reciprocal positive relationship between the direction PATH gives, as well as increases in confidence and motivation.

### ***Child centeredness***

The third theme that arose was child-centeredness. Specifically, the PATH process elicited the voice of CYP as well as gave them control in decision-making. For example, Parent 3 described how everything that her child said came from his own ‘volition’:

*“I mean X was basically asked to go through, not prompted, he was asked to go through everything so it was coming from him of his own volition”* (Parent 3).

Consistently, Student 1 described how the PATH process really allowed him to speak and be heard:

*“Just sitting there and just focussing and just letting it all out”* (Student 1).

The previous two quotes illustrate how both parents and students felt listened to. This is an important sub-theme because it illustrates how PATH, as a form of PCP, is achieving one its fundamental aims. That is, putting the views, needs, and aspirations of the CYP at the forefront of the planning process. This, at least for the current participants, counters the objection that PCP may simply be a ‘paper exercise’, unrelated to the views and lives of the services users (Claes et al., 2010).

The PATH process was also seen as one that gave CYP control over decisions about their lives. For example, Student 1 described how the targets set during PATH helped him decide on future education settings and jobs, using Fast Tomato (a career guidance platform):

*“I’ve been on Fast Tomato I’ve looked at my careers and I’ve also looked at what jobs and what colleges would have that type of career.”*

Parent 2 also commented on how it enabled her child to make a decision about college options:

*“he’s obviously changed his mind and now we’ve got on it that he has other options on the graphic. We asked him what other (college) options may you want and he changed his (college) options on there” (Parent 2).*

Again, this sub-theme illustrates how key stakeholders perceived PATH to be achieving a core aim: to empower CYP to have control in decisions that affect them.

### ***Possible barriers to successful implementation***

The final theme reflects possible barriers to successful implementation of PATH and consequently its potential impact. Possible barriers include a lack of time, insufficient preparation, not having the ‘correct’ participants present (e.g., external professionals, such as

speech and language therapists), and not knowing the CYP well enough. The school staff member described how much preparation was needed:

*“It’s a lot of preparation so if you do it only once in a while ... you forget about it and tend not to use it”* (school staff member).

That is, to facilitate the PATH process effectively, a lot of time and preparation is needed. This staff member also believed that it required practice, presumably because of the skill involved in facilitation. In addition, parents and students talked about not knowing what to expect:

*“No I wasn’t expecting to be all like that ... what would have helped ... (is if I was told) what we’re gonna do is a pathway of X’s future”* (Parent 1).

It appears that there are two important aspects to the preparation sub-theme: first, the PATH requires a lot of preparation and, second, parents and students felt unprepared for the meeting. If they had been better prepared, they may have been more able to express their views, which in turn, may have led to greater impact. To improve effectiveness of the PATH process, sufficient preparation time is required and key stakeholders should know what to expect in advance of the meetings.

## **Discussion**

This small scale research aimed to understand the impact of PATH for CYP in mainstream settings. Through interviews with key stakeholders, four main themes were identified: Usefulness of the graphic, positive effects of the PATH process, child-centeredness, and possible barriers to successful implementation. The findings indicate that participants perceived the PATH process as having important and beneficial effects, such as increasing confidence and motivation of CYP. In addition, the distinctive graphic that is produced during this process was viewed to lead to positive impact, as a prompt to remind individuals



of targets agreed as part of the meeting. The findings are in accordance with the underlying philosophy of PCP, by eliciting the voice of CYP and allowing them to be at the forefront of decision-making processes. A number of barriers to successful implementation of PATH were also identified, including the time involved in preparing for and undertaking the meeting. As this is the first peer reviewed, published study designed to investigate the impact of PATH for CYP from mainstream settings, the findings provide a novel contribution to the evidence base for PATH.

The findings from this study are consistent with two previous studies investigating PATH. In accordance with Philp and Brown (2017) and Bristow (2013), increases in the CYP's motivation and confidence were reported. In addition, Bristow (2013) reported that many participants felt daunted by the PATH process, possibly because they were ill-prepared. Participants in the current study also reported that they did not feel adequately prepared for the PATH meeting. These results suggest that a key objective for the future should be to ensure that parents and students are adequately prepared in advance of PATH meetings.

As in any piece of research, the current study is not without limitations. Importantly, only one member of school staff was interviewed, and two of the sub-themes from the 'possible barriers to successful implementation' theme arose solely from this staff member. This is unsurprising as this participant was the facilitator of the meetings. However, because other staff members were not interviewed, it is not possible to ascertain whether these themes simply reflect personal views, or those of other staff members involved in the PATH process more generally. Future research should include a wider sample of relevant school staff, as well other professionals involved in the PATH process (such as EPs), to see if similar themes are found. Another limitation is that the sample size was very small, meaning it may have not have reached data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Future research should employ larger samples and maximum variation techniques.

This research represents one of the first investigations of the impact of PATH with mainstream CYP. As such, the findings will form a novel contribution to educational psychology literature and may provide avenues for future research. For example, it would be useful to use quantitative methods to investigate the reported increases in confidence and motivation of CYP following the PATH. These findings, if replicated with larger samples, may help inform the development of a framework to evaluate the PATH process. For example, EPs may check, perhaps through consultation with students and school staff, whether the PATH has helped CYP develop a sense of direction in their lives and whether they have had input in decisions that affect them (such as college options). The findings may also be of benefit to educational psychology services who either use, or are considering using, person-centred techniques and may be used to help inform and shape how educational psychology services and schools implement the PATH process.

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