

Representations of hospitality at *The Special Needs Hotel*

Abstract:

Norms of ‘professionalism’ expected by the hospitality industry may create unrealistic and problematic expectations for employing people with learning disabilities. This study provides a first consideration of hospitality training for young people with learning difficulties.

Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyse the popular television documentary series *The Special Needs Hotel*, generating two key themes: hospitality as achieving independence; and hospitality as expectations. Hospitality training is seen as a means of enabling ‘independence’ for young people with learning disabilities with strategies used to ensure the trainees meet the necessary ‘expectations’ and requirements of hospitality work. However, this positive representation contrasts with the struggles, fear and realities of independence and hospitality work for the trainees themselves. Contributing to discourses of representation and notions of inclusion and exclusion in hospitality, this study provides an opportunity to review and vary what is expected of hospitality work to increase employment for people with disabilities.

Keywords: Disability; learning disabilities; hospitality training and employment; independence; representations.

1. Introduction

Evidence exists that many tourism and hospitality businesses remain unchanged in terms of their policies and practices for the employment of people with disabilities¹ (Groschl, 2007). The hospitality industry has not readily found a coordinated way to serve the needs of either employees or customers with disabilities and industry awareness remains low (Bizjak et al., 2010; Darcy and Pegg, 2011; Ozturk et al., 2008). In their study of hotel experiences, for example, Poria et al. (2011) focused on the challenges of the hotel's physical environment as well as staff behaviours with the aim to contribute knowledge to overcome the challenges reported by hotel guests with disabilities. Service providers in the tourism and hospitality industry are given very little education and training around legislation, access provision, service and awareness training related to people with disabilities (Darcy and Pegg, 2011; Daruwalla and Darcy, 2005; Grady and Ohlin, 2009; O'Neill and Ali Knight, 2000). This is despite the fact that efforts to understand people with disabilities are argued to have mostly arisen from recent legislative endeavours (Poria et al., 2011). Likewise, the majority of tourism and hospitality schools have not initiated any specialised programmes for their students for the requirement of meeting the needs of people with disabilities, despite evidence that offering a range of topics on the disabled has the potential to improve attitudes of students towards people with disabilities (Bizjak et al., 2010; Schitko and Simpson, 2012). In short, the hospitality industry has, so far, been a follower rather than a leader with respect to training and employment practices for people with disabilities compared to other industries (Groschl, 2004). Yet employment is a core plank of independent living for people with disabilities and a key part of their identity (Ormerod and Newton, 2013).

Disability is usually categorised into four different types: hearing disability, sight disability, physical disability and intelligence disability (Ozturk et al., 2008). Disability is complex and multi-dimensional (Groschl, 2007). This paper adopts the social model of disability, which views disability as a product of the disabling wider environmental – social and attitudinal barriers that compound a person's impairment and prevent their full participation in society (see Oliver, 1996). As such, removal of the social barriers around disability can serve to significantly improve the lives of people with disabilities by giving them the same opportunities as non-disabled people. This may be an opportunity for the hospitality industry to contribute toward positive social change. Given the need to change societal attitudes before

¹ The term 'people with disabilities' is used throughout this paper as it is consistent with terminology associated with the social model of disability (Gillovic et al., 2018; Oliver, 1996).

there can be an increase in the employment of people with disabilities, there is an important need to examine representations of disability in hospitality training and employment.

Representations are important because they set expectations around behavioural norms and can help break down barriers by influencing the perceptions of those who receive them.

This paper provides a first examination of how hospitality work and training is represented in the popular television documentary series *The Special Needs Hotel* as it relates to training for young people with learning disabilities.² The three-part TV series followed the experiences of young people with learning disabilities as they received hands-on training in ‘the art of hospitality’ at the Foxes Hotel and Academy in Minehead, England (<http://foxesacademy.ac.uk/>). Foxes Academy is a specialist catering college and residential training hotel for young adults with learning disabilities. Whilst previous literature attests to the importance of disability awareness training in hospitality in informing and changing attitudes of employers and co-workers towards people with disabilities, such training has mostly focused on the customer with a disability, not employees or trainees. In fact, a focus on programmes dedicated to the training of people with disabilities is not evident in previous hospitality literature. However, such a focus can yield important insights into how hospitality work and training is considered and positioned within the perspective of disability, especially within the perspective of intellectual or learning disabilities which frequently renders young people more marginalised in employment than any other group of young people with disabilities (<http://foxesacademy.ac.uk/the-special-needs-hotel-on-channel-5/>). This poses challenges to employers over their management of the hotel servicescape and how they can render it welcoming or unwelcoming for employees and consumers with disabilities (Baker et al., 2007; Bitner, 1992; Poria et al., 2011). However, this understanding can open opportunities to review and realign hospitality employment and training with ethical and non-discriminatory principles and guidelines, which are essential if employment of people with disabilities is to be improved.

2. Literature review

2.1. Hospitality representations in the popular media

² ‘Young people with learning disabilities’ is a term used consistently throughout the popular TV series, *The Special Needs Hotel*.

Television in particular, due to its accessibility, can serve as an excellent medium through which to view hospitality and wider society. Audiences can view television programmes as extensions of their own lives (O'Connor et al., 2009), or the lives they wish to have. As Parks and Kumar (2003, p. 3) noted, “we are all shaped in one way or another by the social, economic, and cultural relations that the medium of television has historically worked to structure and reproduce”. However, viewers have agency as, according to Gilhespy and Harris (2011), dominant forms of cinema and television offer a certain sort of viewing experience that ‘positions’ the audience or viewer. Film and television programmes are widely recognised for their power to induce people to visit destinations (Beeton, 2001; O'Connor et al., 2009). Reality television portrayals of tourist behaviour have been found to generate negative publicity about resort image, as Williams-Burnett et al. (2016) found to be the case in Kavos on the island of Corfu. This is significant, as TV viewing behaviour has been found to be the strongest predictor of entertainment motivated tourism (Spears et al., 2013).

Television programmes set in hospitality contexts such as *'Allo 'Allo!* and *Fawlty Towers* have proved extremely popular with television audiences, often conveying strong messages about hospitality settings such as hotels (Bartley, 2007), chefs, kitchens and restaurants (Leggott and Hochscherf, 2010; Randall, 2000), and airports (Hill, 2005) as sites for humour and drama. In more recent times, hospitality settings have also been used for ‘reality’ shows such as *Hell's Kitchen*, *Airport*, etc. While a popular form of entertainment, reality shows tend to pitch hospitality work settings as sites for conflict, stress, aggression, frustration, and competition, where the strongest and loudest will win.

Berger's (2016) content analyses of disability themes in popular media aimed to reveal the taken-for-granted assumptions about disability that underlie an audience's interpretation of the material. He explains that an analysis of humour in disability film and television illustrates the ways in which media portrayals both reflect and influence symbolic themes or cultural meanings about disability that are prevalent in society. Encouragingly, he also states that “a creative or cleverly constructed counter-narrative is able to disrupt this sign system, advance a critique of ableism, and portray disability as an affirmative social status and identity” (p. 158). Berger also cautions researchers using cultural material such as television, as to whether the public are able to “distinguish between disabling humour and disability humour? Is the difference between laughing at them and laughing with them a scholarly nuance that goes ‘over the head’ of most consumers?” (p. 166).

Whilst providing a lens on society, television also features information about the environment of work, serving as an important and easily accessible medium for people to access career information. However, few scholars have analysed television's depiction of occupational roles in relation to gender and racial stereotypes (Signorielli and Kahlenberg, 2001), and even fewer have examined how disability is represented in tourism and hospitality work as portrayed on TV.

2.2. Disability, hospitality training and employment

It is often cited that people with disabilities are an untapped source of workers for hospitality labour (Chi and Qu, 2004; Groschl, 2004). The fact that the size of the disabled market is estimated at 10–19 percent of the general population is a notable reason for this position (Poria et al., 2011). Nevertheless, it is widely recorded that people with disabilities have lower employment rates than the non-disabled. Although the vast majority of them would prefer to work, people with disabilities continue to experience workplace discrimination (Chi and Qu, 2004; Ormerod and Newton, 2013; Paez and Arendt, 2014), are more likely to work part-time, and their hourly and annual incomes are less than employees without disabilities. The greatest barriers to the employment and advancement of people with disabilities have been identified as: lack of related work experience/lack of required skills/training; managers' lack of knowledge about how to make accommodations; managers, co-workers, and consumers' negative attitudes/stereotypes; and costs associated with training, supervising and making accommodations (Bruyere, 2000; Kalargyrou and Volis, 2014; Paez and Arendt, 2014). The lower employment rates of people with disabilities can become stigmatised wherein people with disabilities can be unfairly characterised as dependent upon society and public support (Chi and Qu, 2004; Groschl, 2004).

Being productive on a daily basis through meaningful employment is critical to establishing one's independence, life satisfaction and self-esteem (Wehman et al., 1998). Groschl (2004) positions hotel and hospitality work as better able to accommodate people with disabilities than many other industries because of its wide range and variety of employment opportunities. Previous research argues that positive attitudes of employers and co-workers can facilitate successful employment for people with disabilities, with negative attitudes being one of the greatest barriers to employment opportunities. Indeed, Paez and Arendt (2014) reported unfavourable hotel and restaurant managers' attitudes towards working with

employees with disabilities. Chi and Qu (2004) found that prior positive experiences of working with people with disabilities can influence whether employers' attitudes towards disability are favourable. This corroborates much previous research (Diksa and Rogers, 1996; Hutchins, 1990; Kanter, 1988; Levy et al., 1993; McFarlin et al., 1991).

Furthermore, employers' attitudes are found to vary according to disability type. Wilgosh and Skaret (1987), McFarlin et al. (1991), Callahan (1994) and Scheid (1999), for instance, determined that employers were more likely to express positive attitudes toward individuals with physical or sensory disabilities than those with intellectual or psychiatric disabilities; these attitudes translated into their greater concerns over hiring persons with intellectual, learning or emotional disabilities compared to people with physical disabilities. There is a perception that workers with intellectual or learning disabilities are less able to adapt to new working methods (Chi and Qu, 2005). Yet employees with learning disabilities are said to make valuable workers for the restaurant industry in particular, where the work is repetitive, tedious and performed away from customers (Chi and Qu, 2005). As a wider point to note, structural modifications to the work environment are not as required by workers with a learning disability compared to those with physical types of disability.

Employers tend to treat disability as a homogenous entity. Regardless of their disability type, workers with disabilities are generally stereotyped by employers as requiring extra time, support and supervision; intensive training; having lower productivity, performance and mobility; greater concerns about absenteeism; and receiving negative attitudes from co-workers (Chi and Qu, 2005; Groschl, 2007; Kalargyrou and Volis, 2014; Paez and Arendt, 2014). Conversely, workers with disabilities are generally found to have greater loyalty to the company; punctuality in the job; dependability and duty devotion; greater levels of cooperation, dedication and excitement about the job; lower turnover rates and absenteeism (Batty, 1991; Kalargyrou and Volis, 2014; Paez and Arendt, 2014).

Given the important role that the human resource (HR) function plays in employing people with disabilities, previous studies have examined the HR policies and practices of hotels in regards to people with disabilities. However, few best practices have been found. Groschl (2007) reported that none of the participating hotels in his study had policies or practices referring specifically to employees with disabilities. In his study of HR policies in the hotel industry in Canada, Groschl (2007), for example, found that the complexity of defining disabilities, limited legal pressure, and the limited awareness, understanding and

communication between employees with and without a disability posed a deterrent to the attraction and integration of people with disabilities. Disability awareness training tends to be low on the agenda of managers (Darcy and Pegg, 2011).

A further barrier commented on in previous literature is hospitality managers' preference for aesthetically pleasing employees with good self-presentation skills (Groschl, 2007; Nickson et al., 2005). Groschl (2007) reports, "Some of the interviewees perceived the hotel industry as image conscious fearing that employees with disabilities could destroy hotels' aesthetics" (p. 680). The speed, efficiency and quality service expected of hotel employees were also mentioned (Groschl, 2004). Thus, there is a need to consider how a focus on the physical/aesthetic appearance and expectations of customer service delivery can be reviewed and realigned with ethical and non-discriminatory principles and guidelines if employment for people with disabilities is to be improved (Groschl, 2007).

Notwithstanding the employment of people with disabilities, the hospitality industry has also generally been criticised for the performance of the sector in regards to catering to the needs of people with disabilities, which leads to overt or subtle discrimination against them (McKercher et al., 2003; Ozturk et al., 2008; Wang and Cole, 2014). A review of relevant literature reveals that very few hotels are found to actively pursue disability as a market segment, and any involvement with disability organisations tends to be reactive rather than strategic (Darcy and Pegg, 2011; Groschl, 2004, 2007). In short, an understanding of the behaviour of guests with disabilities is an often overlooked but essential component of hotel operations (Darcy and Pegg, 2011; Groschl, 2004, 2007).

Given the above literature, and common findings of previous studies, it is important to include people with disabilities in the workforce as fully as possible in order to overcome employers' attitudinal barriers and to dispel myths and biases (Chi and Qu, 2005). Given the importance of attitudes and communication as part of the socialisation process, much previous literature has focused on how to achieve behavioural change; specifically, how personal and societal attitudes to disability can be improved through the provision of further information and/or training (Bizjak et al., 2010; Daruwalla and Darcy, 2005; Grady and Ohlin, 2009; Paez and Arendt, 2014). Daruwalla and Darcy (2005) explored the role, nature and impact of disability awareness training in the tourism industry and concluded that such training can be a valuable resource for forming and changing the attitudes of non-disabled persons towards those with disabilities. Paez and Arendt (2014) further noted that developing

and carrying out training for people with disabilities on communication, social and technical skills greatly enhances their workplace integration. Indeed, awareness training about disability has most often been geared towards customers with disabilities, rather than employees with disabilities (Groschl, 2004). Less emphasis in previous research has been placed on the nature of supported employment, mentoring, the use of assistive technology, rehabilitation technology and accommodation strategies to successfully integrate people with disabilities into the work environment. An exception to this, however, is the study by Kalargyrou and Volis (2014) who identify the business practices of eight hospitality industry leaders in disability inclusion. A focus on hospitality training for people with disabilities is not evident at all in previous literature.

3. Study method

The aim of the study was to examine how hospitality work and training is represented in the popular television documentary series *The Special Needs Hotel* as it relates to the training of young adults with learning disabilities. The title of the documentary series refers to a hospitality training school for people with learning disabilities called 'Foxes Academy and Hotel'; the representation of this school in the documentary series is the focus of this study. Foxes academy offers training in "independent life skills", based in residential learner houses, and training in catering skills in a real, operating hotel with paying guests. The ethos of Foxes Academy is centred on equality, diversity and quality of life, and its mission is to inspire young people with learning disabilities to "go into the world with skills, confidence and a passion to succeed" (<http://foxesacademy.ac.uk/>). In terms of hospitality training, each trainee gets experience of three vocational departments – housekeeping, food preparation, and food service – before deciding which department they like the best. The trainees study over three years, and over the course of their training are prepared to apply for and seek hospitality employment. The three-part series produced by Lambent Productions Ltd. aired in the U.K. in September 2015, Canada in August 2016 and New Zealand in 2017 at prime viewing time with each episode screening for one hour (including advertisements).

Representation means "using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to 'Other' people" (Avraham and First, 2010, p. 482). Hall (1997) identifies three approaches to explaining how representation of meaning through language works – the reflective, the intentional and the constructionist or constructivist approaches. We

take a constructionist approach to understand meaning in language because we are interested in how representational systems, such as a television documentary, construct and communicate meaning and comprehension of the world around us (Hall, 1997). More broadly, constructionist approaches are recommended for the study of minority groups, in particular people with disabilities (e.g. Poria et al., 2011). Guided by the work of Harris et al. (2011), who used thematic analysis to analyse a hotel television series, and Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process, we used inductive thematic analysis to determine the key messages about disability, training and hospitality as represented through *The Special Needs Hotel* documentary series. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that, through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool to provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data.

The initial stage of data collection and analysis involved the two researchers watching separately (investigator triangulation) all three episodes. An advantage of investigator triangulation is that confirmation of data among investigators lends greater credibility to the observations (Denzin, 1970). In the second closer viewing of each episode, the researchers watched them together and made notes before coding any interesting features. These preliminary notes served as a point of reference for working with the documentary content – both observations and characters' dialogue – and continued to inform the process as the coding became increasingly complex. The next step was to sort the 37 codes generated into seven sub-themes organised under two main themes: hospitality as 'achieving independence' for young people with learning disabilities; and clear 'realistic expectations' of the nature of hospitality work. Next, we reviewed the data to check that a clear definition for each theme was established, which captured the coded extracts. The themes were then compared to those in previous research, looking for synergies and conflict, as noted in the discussion of findings, below.

4. Findings

Two key themes emerged from analysis of the data. Firstly, hospitality training and employment were represented as a form of *achieving independence* for young people with learning disabilities. Secondly, clear *realistic expectations* of the nature of hospitality work and training were represented throughout the series. The key findings and a discussion of their wider implications are presented below.

4.1. Hospitality as achieving independence

Throughout the episodes analysed, a strong theme of ‘achieving independence’ is present. This theme is evident in the way the series is introduced to viewers. In providing three years of intensive hands-on experience of life in a working hotel, we are told in Episode 1 that this is the trainees’ “first job and first time away from home” and that “this hotel could change their lives forever”. In addition to the acquirement of life skills through hospitality training, the series also depicts the students gaining independence through living away from their parents, attending their first disco, socialising with alcohol, sometimes having their first romantic relationship, coping in the ‘outside world’, finding hospitality employment and making plans for the future. In short, achieving independence is represented as quality of life and a transition to independent living and adulthood for these marginalised young people. Getting used to independence away from their family for the first time is shown to be easier for some trainees than others, and reflects the wishes and expectations of their parents.

In Episode 1, for example, viewers are introduced to Amanda who has Downs Syndrome. We are told that this is her “first experience of being independent”. Her mother explains that there was an expectation when Amanda was born that they would try everything to get her to the point of independence. The successful completion of her training at Foxes Academy is described as “life-changing” for Amanda. Her mother explains, “I’ve spent the last nearly 20 years, every day, with Amanda. So, for her to leave is amazing. I’m really excited for her”. In Episode 1, we are also introduced to Katie, a 16-year-old girl diagnosed with ADHD characterised by emotional and behavioural problems and extreme mood swings, who we are told struggled in mainstream schools. Her father explains, “I’d like her to be independent before I shuffle off this mortal coil”. He becomes tearful as he explains that a child’s independence is what every parent would want. He states, “It hurts. All kids like Katie just want to be accepted. She’s such a lovely kid and you just want her to fit in and have a good life”.

Whilst the series depicts hospitality training as achieving independence for the trainees, frequently throughout the three series, trainees’ are shown to struggle with their new-found independence. These struggles are called “wobbles” by the series narrator. In Episode 1, Amanda is shown to be very worried about being away from home. She declares, “I’ve never been away from my family. It’s scary and it’s new. It’s so hard for me, I can’t do it”. There is

a stark contrast presented between an interview with Amanda's mother who believes Amanda is having "a whale of a time", whilst, in reality, Amanda stays in the hotel crying. Amanda is shown being comforted by a fellow trainee and declares, "I miss my mum and dad. I just want to be a baby again". A similar experience is shown for trainee Robyn in Episode 2. Whilst cleaning a bedroom, she begins rocking a small rocking chair with her soft Fox toy in it. She explains,

I used to do that when I was little. I used to have a rocking chair and I used to rock it all the time and now I'm too big. At Foxes you have to be grown up. Be like an adult. I'd still like to be like a child and do things like children do. I don't want to be an adult.

Throughout Episodes 1 and 2, we see the struggle that Robyn has in being alone. In Episode 2, Robyn is eventually encouraged by her fellow trainees to venture out of the hotel alone. Whilst the first experience of venturing out alone was challenging, she proved to herself she could do it. On returning to the hotel after going out on her own, her fellow trainees clap. Robyn raises her hands smiling, "I knew I could do it. I am not a child anymore. I can do more things without staff telling me. I'm an adult". With her hands trembling, she declares, "I have achieved something and I want to achieve more; that's what I want to do". Her friend confirms, "I want her to be as independent as possible; to live her dream".

Also in Episode 2, 23-year-old trainee Alex, who has Downs Syndrome, loses confidence about his future towards the end of his study. He explains, "Living without mum makes me feel not happy and scared, because I don't want to leave her ... I just can't think about it. It makes me feel emotional, and scared of what's going to happen in the future". His mother is called in to a meeting with his supervisors to help with his confidence. One scene depicts a touching conversation between Alex and his mother wherein Alex explains to her,

I'm still going to live with you in the future. I want to live with my family because you mean more to me than anything else. Eventually I will have to move out, but I don't want to. I'm scared.

Explaining to him that she wants him to be as independent as possible because she is not always going to be able to look after him, she explains the importance of going to Foxes Academy for his future independence and how far he has come already. In ending the conversation she positively reinforces, "Now, let's go and hear how good you've been".

In Episode 3, trainee Jack is in his final year of study and, in addition to having ‘fine-tuned’ his hospitality skills, we are told he has also learned to manage his panic attacks and the anaphylactic shocks which accompany his complex Downs Syndrome condition and which are brought on when he gets anxious or is under stress. Indeed, in one scene in Episode 3 he is shown motionless and unresponsive in bed after having a panic attack in the kitchen. His eventual management of such situations, along with his kitchen leadership skills are seen to give him an important source of independence.

Despite the occasional comment by trainees – for example, around “dirty café work” (Jeff, Episode 3) – throughout the series, little attention is given to representation of the more negative aspects of hospitality work depicted by previous studies, including the dirty drudge work, gender stereotyping, and the denigration of workers and harassment (see Harris et al., 2011). The work performed by the trainees is neither unpleasant and undesirable, nor glamorised. Instead, viewers see the joys and successes of young trainees enjoying their work and the independence it affords them. One should consider perhaps the positive impression this has for the TV viewers. Such representations have an important effect on empathetic connections and wider notions of social reality. Indeed, Episode 1 comes to a close with the portrayal of the end-of-term show, at which trainee Thomas reads his poem confidently in public. It is explained that on arrival at Foxes Academy he did not speak at all; this huge increase in confidence is seen as representing independence for him.

In Episode 3, the trainees are being prepared for employment. The independence and increased confidence of the trainees becomes apparent after three years of study. For example, one scene presents a conversation between trainee Harriot and the teacher training her in CV writing and job applications. Harriot is asked whether it is realistic to want to own her own coffee shop, or whether she should get a job in a coffee shop first. She replies, “Some coffee shops might take me”. She is asked about how she will convince them to give her a job. In her reply, she indicates that she will tell them her skills, and that she is kind. She is then asked about what she will do if they say, “But you’ve got a learning disability”. Confidently, Harriot replies,

If they do say that, I’ll probably look for another job elsewhere because I’m not going to stop until I do get one. I’m going to stand up and fight my corner. I’m going to hold my head up high and look somewhere else.

Indeed, we are informed that progress towards independence for the trainees is measured by the trainee thinking about their future for themselves, rather than others thinking about it for them. As one of the Academy's managers explains, "It's all about becoming independent – making his own choices and decisions. It's what we've been training him to do ever since he's been here, and he's finally getting there". This sentiment is also expressed by the trainees themselves upon graduation day when explaining that they are not the same people as when they arrived. One trainee explains, "We all come to Foxes but we've all done it in our own unique special way".

4.2. Hospitality as realistic expectations

The second strong theme to evolve from analysis of the episodes was the expectations from the industry about hospitality work and training. This theme is characterised in the many references made to ensuring the trainees learn the most basic of tasks and the associated time pressure. Our analysis of the episodes found several scenes featuring the work requirements they are being trained to meet; for example, being able to use a knife to chop vegetables, knowing how to clean a toilet, how to wash dishes, how to act "professional[ly]", and how to put a duvet cover on. There are often accompanying narratives around the expectations for each task. For example, in Episode 2, trainee Alex is being instructed to chop onions. Chef explains that,

Alex needs to accept that he's not perfect at everything and it's only through practice and practice again, then he will become better at it, and therefore he will be more confident. That's why we've been doing this with the onions; every day preparing onions. That's the key. If he can do one thing well.

By the end of Episode 2, Alex declares, "I have prepared onions over 100 times; now I'm an expert". Referring to the time pressure of kitchen work, Alex is later told by Chef, "We need to start moving now. It's taken you ten minutes to wrap them [the salad food] up and put them on the fridge". He is also reminded that calling Chef "sparkle" in the kitchen is "not professional". Like many of the other trainees, in Episode 2, we learn that Alex struggled in mainstream schools as his condition is characterised by an over-confident, social nature and not listening. Instead of being a chef, Alex has ambitions to be a "professional chef". We are told that he wants, "things that are probably unattainable or unrealistic for him". Chef

described Alex as being “too big for his boots” and “if he goes into somewhere [a professional kitchen] he might get a punch on the nose for acting like that”.

A further example of work expectations is found in the housekeeping department in Episode 2. Prompted by her supervisor as to why she needs to finish cleaning one room before moving on to the next, trainee Robyn confidently confirms, “If the standards aren’t clean, we are not going to get any guests”. Following this, she describes how, “I am always getting told off. I got told off again today. I don’t like working on my own, you don’t talk to anyone”. In making squeaking noises whilst she cleans the skirting boards, Robyn is asked by her supervisor, “Is that sensible behaviour?”

To achieve the expectations for hospitality work, the training depicted in *The Special Needs Hotel* TV series does appear accommodating to people with learning disabilities. Specifically, accommodations and coping strategies are employed to ensure the trainees are able to meet the requirements and standards expected of them. For example, in Episode 1, the hotel staff try several ways to get trainee Thomas to communicate with guests – with “the world around him”. A speech therapist is brought into the hotel to assess him and find a means to help him communicate. She designs him a fan of cards displaying different emotions to attach to his uniform to help him communicate with staff. These cards are claimed to help him communicate his feelings and help him “find confidence”; staff explain that, “he has come on [in] leaps and bounds”. Similarly, in Episode 2, Callum, who has autism, makes happy sounds as he works in housekeeping but struggles to strike up a conversation. His supervisors make various attempts to improve his social skills. In one scene, Callum is made to be a porter for a day to give him face-to-face contact with hotel guests so that he can practise his customer care skills. The experience does not work and other ways are needed to help him talk to guests. Later in the episode, we see Callum gain social confidence by being requested to successfully book and plan the catering for his own 21st birthday party. For the first time, he uses a phone to book a buffet disco and listens in conversation on the phone.

A further example of an accommodation strategy is presented in Episode 2. Because of his unprofessional behaviour and tardiness, trainee Alex is made to undertake work experience in a “real” professional kitchen at a local residential-care home, away from Foxes Academy, in order to “learn professional work conduct” and to learn boundaries. Whilst undertaking this work experience, we are shown a scene in which Alex breaks into Gangnam style³ dancing in

³ Gangnam Style is a popular song and associated music video produced by Psy in 2012.

the kitchen in front of his co-workers, and chats about having multiple girlfriends whilst at Foxes Academy. As with Callum, the experience does not enable Alex to make the progress he needs and the scene ends with the narrator explaining, “He’s got a lot to learn”. Later in the episode, we see Alex successfully deliver a baking lesson to the residents of the residential home where he is undertaking his work experience.

A further aspect frequently presented throughout the three programme series is that of the trainees receiving positive reinforcement from their supervisors and fellow students. There are frequent references made by the supervisors to how well the trainees are doing. Despite Chef’s criticism of Alex’s unprofessional behaviour, he claims in a supportive manner, “Behind all his bravado, he’s obviously worried about his future”. Turning to Alex, he declares, “You might just make it”. This positivity is reflected in the comments made by parents, by fellow trainees, and also by the trainees themselves. In Episode 1, Amanda declares, “I love work”. This is also demonstrated in the pride that the training staff have in each of the trainees’ successes. The hotel guests also provide positive feedback about the trainees. One guest describes Alex’s manner as “lovely and sweet”. The managers of Foxes Academy claim in Episode 2 that their trainees’ achievements are due to the sheer determination of the staff to see the trainees succeed and that “they never give up”, trying strategy after strategy until one is found to work. One manager explains, “If they don’t leave Foxes being the best they can be, then we haven’t done our jobs properly” (Episode 2). Another explains, “That’s all I want for all of them, the best” (Episode 3).

The struggles experienced by the trainees in meeting the hotel’s expectations of them are also depicted. For instance, in Episode 1, Katie is seen to bring her soft toy into the kitchen with her whilst undertaking food preparation. We are told that she is the youngest trainee and has good skills but gets distracted; she finds comfort in having her soft toy with her. Often, expectations are not met because of a trainee’s medical condition. For instance, in Episode 1, the kitchen is shown to be late in serving the restaurant because trainee Katie has emptied all the washing up liquid over the floor of the kitchen on purpose. Testing boundaries and anger outbursts are characteristic of her ADHD condition and a means to escape the task she has been given because she does not like being told what to do. Chef explains,

It’s not always their choice to come to Foxes Academy. Some have been sent here. It’s for their own good at the end of the day, but a lot of them don’t want to be here. They don’t see that it’s giving them a skill for the rest of their life.

Katie returns to the kitchen and is given positive reinforcement by Chef. However, later in Episode 1, Katie is sent home because her continued outbursts are perceived to be affecting other students. She is later given one final chance and allowed back into the Academy. For others, like Thomas, when the stress of the work gets too much for him, he is advised to have five minutes quiet time to calm down. Thomas is shown to frequently get overwhelmed by the nature of the work and the busyness of the hotel. He is shown to deal with this by taking off to sit underwater at the bottom of the swimming pool.

5. Discussion

The medium of television is often viewed as a mirror of society (Harris et al., 2011). Whilst it is an important lens for shaping public attitudes towards disability, a focus on hospitality training and employment for people with disabilities as depicted by popular media such as TV is not evident at all in previous tourism and hospitality scholarship. Whilst hospitality work is often an entry-level job for many employees (Mooney et al., 2016; Murray et al., 2017), the significance of hospitality training and work for the young people with learning disabilities represented in this TV series was more profound. Hospitality is not just a career opportunity, but is represented as a vehicle for transformation from dependent child to independent adult. Indeed, many previous disability studies advocate the importance of independence on an individual's quality of and satisfaction with life (Bishop and Allen, 2003; Raty and Larsson, 2007).

However, our research showed that not all the trainees wanted this independence and often struggled with the training, both emotionally as well as physically, due to the nature of their disability. Often, their parents had made the decision for them to attend Foxes Academy, revealing a power differential between the expectations of the parents and supervisors, and the experiences of the trainees themselves. Trainees being controlled by trainers is not extraordinary, though, as work in the hotel industry is shaped according to clear power differentials within hierarchical organisations. Jung and Yoon (2013) found that hotel employees' perceptions of stress depends more on the particular workplace than on personal characteristics, as the main source of stress is the organisation's unique rules and particular work environment. However, *The Special Needs Hotel* documentary revealed that these trainees are also strongly influenced by their parents who are shown visiting the

establishment, attending meetings with trainers, and getting frequent feedback about the performance and behaviour of their children.

The portrayal of the professionalism expected in hospitality work and training reproduces a broader stereotyping of professionalism that depicts potentially different power relations between those training in hospitality who have disabilities and those who do not. In short, people with learning disabilities can be represented as being unprofessional as hospitality workers and requiring accommodation to meet the standards of ‘doing hospitality’, standards which have been associated with inducing stress in hospitality workers in general (Tepeci and Bartlett, 2002; Young and Corsun, 2010; Zhao and Ghiselli, 2016). For example, this research showed that there needed to be accommodations made for trainees with learning disabilities before they were able to handle the speed and delivery expected of efficient hospitality service transaction (Brown and Dev, 1999; De Jorge and Suárez, 2014).

In respect of professional physical appearance, in contrast to the usual aesthetics required for professional hospitality service (Groschl, 2007; Harris and Small, 2013; Nickson et al., 2005), there are references made in the TV series to the comical way in which the trainees’ themselves view their uniforms. For example, in Episode 1, Amanda laughs and explains she feels “like a clown” in her kitchen uniform. Furthermore, unlike previous studies where some hospitality workers are made not visible to guests (such as in a study of the portrayal of migrant workers in the British television series *Hotel Babylon* by Harris et al., 2011), this series made the trainees with learning disabilities visible within the hotel operations. However, instances were observed where the narrator refers to their invisibility from the guests. As one example of this, in Episode 1, the narrator informs us that, “Behind the scenes, unlikely trainees are getting a crash course in hospitality”. Discourses of inclusion and exclusion frequently frame previous hospitality conceptualisations (Lynch et al., 2011), often implying that there are differences in power between host and guest. In the series, we found that the trainees appear visually to be represented in an inclusive way, but rather, the differential power and hierarchies between themselves, their supervisors and expected standards can also render them excluded. Furthermore, the level of professionalism raised in the series around hospitality work and training is somewhat at odds with the vast array of previous literature that defines hospitality as a genuine practice of welcome (for a recent example, see Lynch, 2017).

6. Conclusions

Applying a constructionist approach, this paper sought to provide a first examination of how hospitality work and training is represented in the popular television documentary series *The Special Needs Hotel* as it relates to training for young people with learning disabilities and the wider implications for the nature of hospitality and employment. Our research showed that the TV series provides an overwhelmingly positive representation of hospitality training and employment for a group of young people with learning disabilities who would otherwise be highly excluded from the workplace. Hospitality training, and an eventual career in hospitality, are seen as important to gaining independence for this group of people. Whilst the series is important in raising positive awareness and opportunities for hospitality employment, such positive images of ‘can-do’ attitudes, individuals’ achievements and success, and effective support contrast with the struggles, fear and realities of independence and hospitality work for the trainees themselves.

The findings of this study raise a challenging set of questions about what is deemed ‘professional’ behaviour and the norms expected by the hospitality industry, and how these norms and expectations translate into hospitality training, especially in consideration of people with special needs. The study, for us, revealed important silences about hospitality work and employment. Firstly, there were silences around issues of health and safety in the hospitality workplace and work conditions. There was also no mention of hospitality human resource policies and practices, nor the need for training on the nature of disabilities. Unlike pertinent findings reported in previous literature, the series made no reference to potentially negative attitudes of co-workers or employers, seen as one of the biggest barriers for people with disabilities in relation to employment. Rather, at Foxes Academy, the trainees remained in supported, accepting work climates. As such, there is a fear that, whilst raising public consciousness, the representation portrayed through this series may create unrealistic and problematic expectations regarding behavioural norms in relation to employing people with learning disabilities. This is an important avenue for future research consideration.

Conversely, there is an opportunity to *vary* what we expect in terms of the expected ‘look and feel’ of hospitality work and service delivery. If we achieve that, then we might open further employment opportunities for people with disabilities. In doing so, the industry may also send an important message that disabled people are welcome in all facets of participation, as hosts and guests. Importantly, the hospitality industry needs to recognise that the employment

of people with disabilities is vital for workforce diversity and an important positioning for competitive advantage (Paez and Arendt, 2014). As demonstrated by the examples given in this paper from analysis of *The Special Needs Hotel*, the inclusion of people with disabilities can make the hospitality experience more rich, meaningful, personal, unique and memorable.

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