Promoting inclusive learning and social experiences for young disabled people at school

Dr Berni Kelly
Dr Jude MacArthur, Sarah Sharp & Michael Gaffney

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The Study

- 3 year ethnographic study
  - Observation ('being with')
  - Interviewing young people, parents, school staff
  - Cartoon books, stories, drawings, poems and letters
- 4 researchers, 8 disabled & 8 non-disabled young people aged 10-14 yrs
- Matched gender, mainstream school class, with/out disabilities
- City & rural schools
- Primary, secondary & area schools

Young Expert Voices

- Relationships at school
- Experiencing disability
- Supporting agency & resistance
- Listening to young disabled people
- Interpretations of disability/impairment
- Teaching, school culture and diversity

Relationships

- Young disabled people's experiences are interwoven in complex and shifting relationships with peers and teachers

- Social and learning experiences at school are inextricably linked

- Caring teacher and peer relationships are the key foundation for inclusive learning and social experiences

Diversity

- Young disabled people have diverse school experiences & diverse experiences of impairment and disability

- Disability is not the only aspect of difference and diversity in schools

- Young disabled people dislike expectations they should do things with other disabled peers help each other or be friends

Interpretations of Disability

- Varying personal and professional meanings attributed to disability and impairment

- Detrimental effects on learning and social experiences:
    - Over-emphasising impairment labels leading to low expectations

    - Denying the experience of impairment and disability leading to unmet learning needs

Experiencing Disability

- Range of experiences of disability: structural and cultural
- Disabling peer and teacher attitudes
- Lower expectations for learning
- Limited/no interaction with teacher
- Reliance on untrained/unsupported teacher aides
- Segregated learning opportunities
- Social isolation
- Limited participation in school and community activities
- Bullying

Experiencing Disability: Low Expectations

- Feel different because teachers give them different work or ignore them

- Want access to a challenging learning experiences

- Aware of different practice and attitudes across teacher within one school

Experiencing Disability: Bullying

- Social isolation & lack of friends was common for disabled students

- Several were ostracised and bullied, with bullying frequently focused on impairment

- When asked how he would describe himself to a new teacher, Pete said:

  "That I get bullied lots... I learn a bit different."

Bullying

- Identifying the events and those involved can be challenging for teachers

- Pete and Luke felt that they were not always believed when he reported bullying

- Some teachers suggested that disabled students have an inaccurate understanding of what constitutes bullying

Agency & Resistance

- Young disabled people used their agency and resistance to:
  1. Negotiate complex relationships and school experiences
  2. Influence learning and social experiences at school
  3. Respond to experiences of disability
  4. Educate peers and teachers about diversity and ability

1. Negotiate complex relationships and school experiences

- Initiate and participate in social interactions and activities with peers, including joint peer activities deliberately engaged in without the teacher's knowledge

- Discussed their school work seriously

- Actively resisted attitudes, structures, and experiences that discriminated against them or differentiated them from their classmates

- Behaved differently for individual teachers in response to their approach to class discipline and teaching disabled students

- Used structures that were only available to disabled students to skip classes, opt out of lunchtime activities and avoid extra school work

Responding to Agency & Resistance: Classroom Support

- Some teachers modified their teaching approaches to accommodate young people's desire to be with their peers
  - Small group withdrawal from class
  - Teacher aide support for whole class
  - Peer support/supportive pairing
  - Alternative communication strategies

- Anna's teacher explained: "so children are not targeted… we never have adults taking them out of class... Children move in and out of classes for all kinds of reasons, it's no different (for disabled children)".

Acknowledging Difference

- Disabled young people needed and wanted their learning needs to be acknowledged and met

- Teachers should be responsive to the challenges young disabled people may encounter in seeking to learning and participate in the same ways as others in the class

- Inclusion also requires acknowledgement of difference and alternative teaching approaches rather than an expectation that all students will fit with the majority culture

- Important for teachers to value difference ways of thinking, being, participating and learning

- Schools need support and resources to find new ways to meet diverse learning needs

2. Influence Learning & Social Experiences: Classroom Support

- Ask teacher aides to move back and give them space to be part of the peer group

- Explain how classroom support could be used more effectively to meet their needs

- Joanne asked that her teacher aide be more available to help in PE:

  " I would rather have her stay for the whole class instead of just changing me and then leaving and going to help someone else. I am not like being mean to the person that she is helping but I would like her to help me like if I can't do something in the class I would like her to do something else with me."

3. Respond to Disabling Experiences: Bullying

- Telling peers and teachers

- Responding individually:

  - Robert hit back often resulting in punishment for both him and the bully

  - Adam responded to teasing from female students by making overt sexual signs he knew would annoy them.

4. Educate Peers & Teachers About Diversity & Ability

- Educating teachers about ways to enhance their learning

- At this school review, Pete explained how being removed from a class for extra reading support was unhelpful because his class teacher expected him to catch up on her class work in his own time, as well as completing his homework

- Joanne was fed up with teachers ignoring her impairment-related needs so she wrote a letter to her teachers

Enabling Relationships

- Teachers who engaged in enabling relationships with disabled students:
  - actively supported their learning and participation in school life
  - had high expectations for their learning and their future
  - adopted a social model perspective of disability
  - advocated on their behalf with other school staff
  - encouraged them to have a say about their education and listened to young people's views
  - supported their agency and resistance

School Culture & Diversity

- Varying teacher practice and school cultures
  - strong leadership
  - critical dialogue & reflective practice
  - levels of commitment to inclusion & social justice
  - empowering peer and teacher relationships

- Disabling attitudes Vs empowering approaches

- Supporting or diminishing young people's agency

- Listening and learning from young disabled people

Cultural Context: Disability/Impairment

- Teachers vary in their understanding about impairment and disability and about the effects on young people's school life

- Some teachers were reflexive and responsive to disabled children's perspectives, views, and experiences, acknowledging their competence and agency
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- Others were unreflexive and contributed to the construction of difference through deficit-oriented positions that viewed disabled children as incompetent

- Most lacked knowledge and support and were unsure about their actions in relation to disabled children

- Professional development & resources

Young Expert Voices: Lived Experiences

- Address cultural divisions in schools – disabled children are both the same and different

- Encourage teachers to consider how their practice and the structural and cultural features of their school contribute to the *enablement or disablement* of young people: *barriers to being* as well as *barriers to doing*

- Teaching approaches for disabled young people can be grounded in key ideas about effective teaching for all diverse students

- Learning takes place within the social context of relationships with teachers and peers – need to develop a nurturing, socially supportive classroom and wider school environment

- Inclusive education policy and practice should be based on the lived experiences of disabled children as they shape their social and learning worlds at school