Eliciting the views of disabled young people on friendship and belonging: Authentic voices for action research engaging schools in change towards social inclusion.

Submitted by Claire Hoskin to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Educational, Child and Community Psychology, May, 2010.

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Abstract of Thesis

This small-scale study is positioned within a social constructionist interpretive paradigm using a mixed methodology employing principles of adapted grounded theory, simple scale-based questionnaires and action research. Fourteen disabled young people from one specialist and three secondary mainstream settings were interviewed using semi-structured interviews to gain their views on friendship and belonging in schools. Three groups of parents, TAs, SENCos and allied education professionals engaged in action research to examine these views, their own views and values and those of disabled young people in their families and schools in order to better understand the sensitivities and subtleties of successful social inclusion and to consider change to whole school practice. The limitations that non-disabled adults unwittingly 'construct' that act as barriers to friendship and social inclusion were explicitly recognised in this interpretive research as a contribution to informing practice and theory in this domain.

Paper One focuses on the views of young people and the meaning and importance they placed on friendship and social relationships in their lives. Findings included that young people in specialist and mainstream setting highly valued friendships but that sustaining friendships in the wider community was often problematic for those participants who attended schools outside their local community. This mainly affected the specialist setting students but was also recognised as an issue by some of the mainstream parents who lived outside the catchment area. Findings also

revealed that young people gained their sense of belonging from the positive relationships they formed with TAs and teachers as well as friends. In order for friendship and positive social inclusion to develop, however, participants required schools to provide a supportive environment of accessible rooms, doors and lifts and adults who trusted them to have the competency and agency to manage their social times and spaces with choice and autonomy. The issue of 'surplus visibility' was highlighted by disabled young people who spoke of an experience of school where lack of choice concerning *where* and *with whom* to spend break times limited their friendship opportunities and sense of well-being and inclusion. This was compounded by an expectation of compliance by adults and automatic assumption of their *belonging* to a *disabled* group despite differences of sex, gender or common interests. The participants valued genuine connection through humour, interests and social support and were active in seeking private time for talking with friends. Schools that provided a range of highly social or quieter, more private, locations for students were highly valued. Paper Two describes using these views as stimulus for action research to bring about change towards improved social inclusion. Groups of parents, senior management, SENCos, TAs and other education professionals met formally three times over a four month period. These groups examined vignettes selected from data from paper one, engaged in debate and discussions, interviewed disabled young people themselves, formulated key concept maps leading to revised theoretical frameworks, reflected and evaluated the process of the action research and considered

practice change or further research. This stage was a continued process of seeking to hear authentic voices, in depth discussion and reflection on what we were learning from disabled young people combined with our own knowledge, values, and beliefs. This led to the development of conceptual models and practical change intentions to promote social inclusion. Intentions to change included

- Developing alternative social rooms with minimal TA presence

- Including disabled young people in TA selection processes

- Involving parents in reviewing the school inclusion policy

- Establishing a regular parents' support group

- A commitment to keep listening to young people's voices and preferences on key matters rather than 'assuming that we already know!'

- Lengthening the lunch break in the specialist setting to ensure time for socialising and friendship building

These commitments to change demonstrated that schools were able to engage successfully in the action research process, valued parents' contributions further and were willing to change practice towards greater social inclusion of disabled young people and parents.

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Appendices for Paper One and Paper Two

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