

Children's Embodied Social Capital and (Dis)ability

Connecting Micro and Macro Scales of Inclusion/Exclusion

Summary of Key Findings and Policy Recommendations



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Overview of Research

The research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), ref: RES: 062-23-1073-A. The project explored the social relationships of young people with and without diagnoses of Special Educational Needs (SEN) and/or disabilities in different school spaces, and links with home and leisure spaces. By contrast to much research about inclusion and education, young people themselves were the key participants. Children/youth with a range of diagnoses of SEN took part, including: 'Behavioural Emotional and Social Difficulties' (BESD), 'learning difficulties', and on the 'Autistic Spectrum (AS). (Our preferred terms socio-emotional/learning differences express both the embodied experience of difference and that the norms of competence against which young people are compared are socio-spatially specific). These groups have been neglected in previous research and often have negative experiences of school.

How young people's social relationships connect to, reflect, or challenge, broader scale, enduring, socio-spatial inequalities was a key focus, in relation to: SEN/disability; socio-economic background/'class'; gender; ethnicity. The difference that space makes to: school and Local Authority (LA) policies/practices, level of SEN and whether rural/urban, was examined.

This research was timely as the nature and appropriate place of the education of young people with SENs are currently changing, with the 2014 Code of Practice coming into force in September. We also talked to some adults, and we may have spoken to you. If so, thank you. We have worked very hard to reflect people's views and experiences accurately (although of course, they do not always coincide). If you have any queries, comments or something else to add, please do get in touch.

Research Methods

1. Secondary analysis to identify and contextualise case-study LAs and schools

Quantitative analyses of the School Census and textual analysis of official documents (e.g. Ofsted Reports) were undertaken. Free-school-meals provided an indicator of socio-economic hardship at the individual level for the entire population. Three different schools (one primary, one secondary and one segregated special school) were selected in three different LAs to represent a diversity of contexts in relation to proportion of young people with SEN, rural/urban, level of free-school meals entitlement, and ethnicity.

2. In-depth qualitative research in school and leisure spaces

2.1. Semi-structured interviews with key institutional actors (total 61)

National-level interviewees included key members of national organisations for supporting and raising the profile of (young) people with disabilities. LA actors included educational psychologists, heads of SEN and CEOs of charities supporting young people with SEN and their families. School-level actors included teachers, lunch-time supervisors, before- and after- school club organisers and classroom assistants.

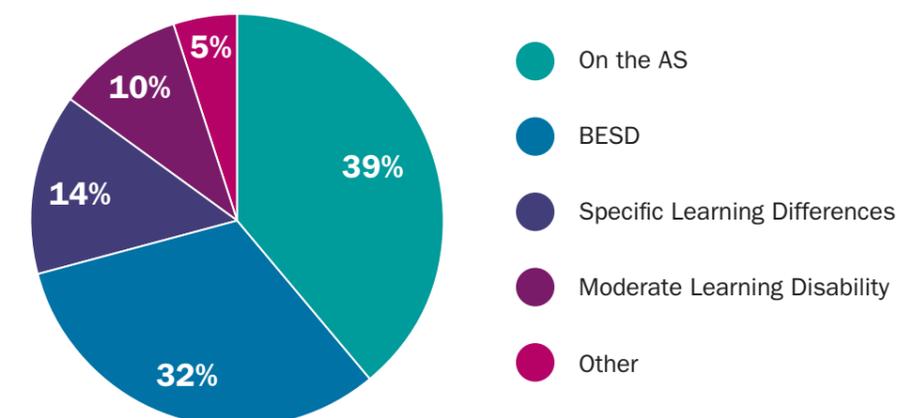
2.2. Participant Observation of school and leisure spaces (approximately 30 days per case-study school)

Intensive in-depth observation was undertaken in a variety of within-school time-spaces (e.g. classrooms, lunch rooms, playgrounds, special units, and before- and after-school clubs). Leisure spaces (e.g. parks, sports and homework clubs) and school trips were also observed.

2.3. Innovative, semi-participatory research with young people (total 104)

Direct research was undertaken with young people, aged between 7 and 16. Our sample included young people with and without diagnoses of SEN, to compare experiences and to gauge how young people without diagnoses perceive those labelled with SEN. Young people with SEN were over-represented, comprising 53% of our samples compared to 22% of school students nationally. The sample included a high proportion of young people diagnosed with BESD, as on the AS and moderate learning difficulties, who have been marginalised in schools and previous studies (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Primary SEN diagnosis of young participants



A diversity of data was generated: e.g. drawings, photographs and even an urban street dance. The majority of participants conducted self-directed photography, informing photo-interviews. All young people also participated in individual, paired interviews and/or focus groups, with most engaging in repeat interviews or focus groups.

Interviews and focus groups lasted 25-40 minutes. Discussion was organised around the themes of: social relationships, inclusions and exclusions, and feelings towards school, home and leisure spaces. Debate in focus groups was more generalised; care was taken not to stigmatise young people via the research.

3. Semi-structured interviews with parents/carers (14)

We interviewed 14 parents/carers of young people involved in the research, yielding interesting findings about social and emotional capital of children and parents/carers, and parents'/carers' interpretations of inclusions/exclusions faced by children.

Ethical Issues

The project was approved by both the University of Reading and Loughborough University Ethics Committees, and care was taken that the research was conducted ethically, preserving anonymity, confidentiality and gaining informed consent of all participants, including children and parents/carers. As expected, a key ethical issue arose as some young people with diagnoses of SEN who wanted to participate in the research found it difficult to organise returning consent forms. To address this, multiple opportunities were provided for the return of consent forms. A key aim of the project was that it should use children's voices and experiences to inform policy and practice, and this report is one component of this endeavour.

It became evident that individual schools could be identified via their characteristics by individuals who know the LA well; therefore LAs have not been identified.

Summary of Findings

One: Social inclusion/exclusion of young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and/or impairments

1. Most of the young people had some friends and some good friends. Most also had been bullied or isolated some point. Young people were included or excluded on a variety of grounds, many of which were not connected to SEN.
2. Young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and/or impairments often experienced social isolation, exclusion and bullying in schools. They also often had more fragile friendships.
3. Young people (both with and without SEN) who are socially isolated generally have more negative attitudes towards and levels of participation in formal aspects of schools (and vice versa). Social inclusion in school is a key facilitator of participation in formal aspects of school.
4. The experiences of young people with SEN differ – these differences give insights into how to prevent the social isolation, exclusion and bullying of these young people. Differences in experience are affected by:
 - **Diagnosis:** Those BESD, as on the Autistic Spectrum, and/or those with Moderate Learning Differences are the most excluded.
 - **Location:** Whether located in a special school, special unit or mainstream school, and the school and Local Authority culture and environment. Those in special schools experienced most social inclusion, although there was still some bullying.
 - **Different practices** of teachers and other adults and children.
 - **School and Local Authority (LA) policies.**
 - **Other aspects of identity** – e.g. social class, gender, ethnicity.

Two: Interconnections between social exclusions of young people with SEN and/or impairments and other exclusions

1. BESD is 'diagnosed' by young people falling outside of normative expectations of behaviour in schools. These expectations are tied to ideas of appropriate ways to educate young people.
2. Similarly identifying moderate learning difficulties depends upon young people falling outside of expectations of learning ability in schools.
3. Young people with BESD usually want to do well, but find it difficult to conform to school rules. Young people with BESD find this frustrating and debilitating.
4. Although 'causes' of BESD are often social (experts emphasise the influence of home backgrounds, but the condition also emerges in specific school contexts), young people experience it as a 'condition'. Young people with BESD are usually not deliberately trying to contravene rules.

5. Professionals who work specifically with young people with BESD demonstrate considerable empathy and sensitivity. However, it is difficult for many teachers to deal positively with young people with BESD as their diagnosis is specifically about behaving inappropriately in place. It can be difficult for teachers and other professionals to remember that young people are not just being naughty.
6. Young people with certain diagnoses of SEN (BESD and moderate learning differences) are more likely to come from poor backgrounds.
7. Young people with BESD are less likely to gain a statement than those with difficulties which are less amorphous and easier to categorise, such as specific learning difficulties or physical impairments. This has severe resource implications for some schools which have lots of children with many problems, but limited resources to address the issues.
8. Those who are both diagnosed with SEN and from poor backgrounds are often especially socially isolated.

Three: What helps promote social, cultural and emotional capital for young people with SEN and/or impairments?

1. Friendships and interests outside school provide emotional and social capital to young people that can influence their experiences within school – but some young people do not have access to these.
2. Families provide important emotional and social capital to most children, and even those families with some problems are mostly viewed positively by the young people.
3. Families with high levels of economic and/or social and cultural capital could significantly enhance young people's sociability when they encouraged and paid for activities or more informal socialising, drawing upon their own activities and networks to allow their young people to socialise.
4. Families' dispositions towards promoting young people's sociality varied considerably and affected young people's social opportunities.

Four: the importance of space, place and context

1. The diagnosis of SEN, especially BESD and moderate learning difficulties, is geographically variable, at the scale of individual schools, even classroom and LAs. Resources can be attached to such a label, especially when receiving a statement, or what will be an Education, Health and Care plan in future years. In some schools, with high numbers of pupils from poor backgrounds, there was an acceptance of a high level of socio-emotional difference and learning differences which were not seen as outside the norm in these contexts, and therefore further diagnoses and resources were often not sought. Therefore, young people in schools in areas with high levels of socio-economic hardship and poverty were disadvantaged via the spatial variability of the SEN process.

2. The potential to convert social capital into cultural capital in the form of education depends on socio-spatial context:
 - The effectiveness of the school.
 - Access to formal qualifications or a meaningful alternative curriculum.
 - Special schools or units as a separate institution or a 'hub' from where young people attend mainstream schools or alternative curricula.
 - Special units or schools producing a relatively pro-school disposition in the face of pervasive mainstream anti-school culture among children.
 - The amount of time dedicated to therapies, extra life-skills or personal and social education focused on addressing the difficulties of the young people, and the quality and effectiveness of these. Sometimes much time was dedicated to these activities, which reduced the time available to young people to engage in other curricula. Also, the quality and usefulness of these activities was variable.
3. The practices and policies of schools and teachers:
 - Some young people reported having been bullied by both teachers and peers in previous schools (not in the current case-study schools)
 - More commonly, teachers can expect specific young people to cause trouble, look at these young people more often, and blame them for being naughty too readily – even when sometimes it was not that young person who was transgressing the rules. Having the label BESD can make this worse.
 - Teachers have a difficult job, and it can be hard to understand that for some young people breaking the rules is not deliberate but part of what the young people experience as a condition.
 - The spatial organisation of classrooms – some young people sat right at the front or right at the back and were isolated in class, others sat with peers and worked in groups with peers. (This is made difficult as some young people wanted to sit alone).
 - In some places young people with SEN were taught by classroom assistants with much less input from teachers than children without these diagnoses. This happened in special units for instance. But also, even when in mainstream classes, if a young person sat with a classroom assistant, the teacher talked less to the student than his/her peers.
 - Being in a special unit or special school can help young people make friends, but also affects who young people's friends are – i.e. they might only have friends with similar SEN characteristics as themselves.
 - Being in a special unit or special school can be difficult for young people who are different in some ways from the other members of that school or unit – especially girls in special units or schools for people on the Autistic Spectrum or diagnosed with BESD, categories in which boys are over-represented.
 - Being in a special unit can label young people as different, but can also provide a sense of a shared identity which can be used to promote the acceptance of difference throughout the mainstream space.

- Units and special schools can be more or less open, with connections to other parts of the school and/or other schools, or closed and bounded. In some schools teachers decided who entered special spaces and in others young people could decide to make use of spaces. In some schools, access to a special unit was dependent upon a particular diagnosis of SEN. In others access depended upon a perceived 'need' which might not be tied to a diagnosis of SEN.
4. The practices and policies of Local Authorities:
- Availability of leisure facilities, either 'specialised' or 'inclusive', was valued but variable in quality and presence.
 - Accessibility of leisure facilities and extra-curricular activities was variable.
 - Young people from poor households and those with SENs were often excluded due to what might be seen as modest costs* and/or the timing of clubs and activities and the inflexibility of transport.
 - The availability of flexible transport for young people with SEN was crucial. Some transport would pick young people up from a friends' house or at a different time rather than straight after school enabling participation in social activities. In other contexts this was seen as impossible.

* For some families on constrained incomes finding £1 or less can be difficult. It was interesting to explore the different views of young people from different socio-economic backgrounds towards the same cost of a specific activity.

Key Recommendations

1. **All actors in education should be aware of the importance of young people's friendships and social inclusion to their attitudes and participation in school and make this central to all aspects of school life.**
Having friends and being socially included has a significant impact on young people's participation in, and attitude towards formal aspects of schools, which might outweigh many formal curricula factors. Thought should therefore be given to young people's sociality in all aspects of school life, from deciding where students sit in class to how pastoral or teaching elements of school are organised. Clearly this should not impede effective teaching and learning.
2. **All actors in education at all levels need to be aware that certain young people are more likely to be isolated, excluded and bullied.**
Not only is this emotionally and socially problematic for the young people, but it can impact upon their attitudes towards and participation within formal aspects of school (and vice versa). Many young people with SEN, especially BESD experience high levels of social exclusion among peer cultures.
3. **Policy at all levels needs to address the intersecting exclusions of young people from poor backgrounds, who might have multiple issues of hardship in their homes and who are over-represented among those with BESD and moderate learning differences.**
These young people are less likely to receive a statement, and this exacerbates the resource issues for schools trying to help these young people to achieve academically and to form friendships and so on. Young people's own peer practices can replicate and reproduce these intersecting exclusions, since those from disadvantaged home backgrounds who are diagnosed with SEN, especially BESD, are very often isolated and excluded by peers. Thought needs to be given to how the changes in the Code of Practice 2014 will affect this group of young people.
4. **Policy at all levels must be aware that SEN 'conditions' are socio-spatially specific and emerge within the context of normative expectations of learning and behaviour which systematically privilege certain groups of young people.**
Although these labels categorise what can be experienced as frustrating and embodied differences by young people, they do not describe a clearly and unambiguously defined bodily or mental state, but relate to specific contexts and ideas about what is 'normal' behaviour, learning ability and so on. These vary spatially, between individual schools, and even classrooms, and between LAs.
5. **Therefore the context of the school is as important to the diagnosis of some young people as being different as is the context of the home.** Being labelled as having SEN can have some negative consequences, which it is difficult to separate from the negative consequences of being different in a specific context. However, resources can be attached to such a label. These are differently applied, however, and effort needs to be put into ensuring that resources for SEN are more evenly distributed and do not reinforce inequalities between schools with poorer and richer intakes.

6. **Different schools within the same LA have different normative expectations about learning and behaviour, which influence whether young people with ostensibly the same characteristics are diagnosed with SEN.** Careful consideration needs to be given to how the new Code of Practice will be implemented to ensure that these issues can be taken into account.
7. **The key to socially including young people with SEN is to provide opportunities to socialise and to develop shared interests and activities with others.** When teachers and other adults try to impose friendships upon children, e.g. via 'buddy schemes', this can exacerbate differences.
8. **Policy at all levels needs to be aware of the importance of access to leisure and extra curricular activities for young people with SEN and/or those from poor backgrounds.** Even very modest costs can exclude young people from poor households. If possible clubs and extra curricula activities should be free.
9. **Transport to and from school should be flexible to enable young people with SEN to participate in extra curricular activities or informal leisure opportunities such as visiting friends' homes.** Transport is a key factor constraining or enabling children's participation in leisure activities.
10. **Sometimes parents need more information and support to help their child with an SEN diagnosis participate in leisure facilities and extra curricular activities.**
11. For the young people in our study, who had been diagnosed with BESD, Moderate Learning Differences or were on the Autistic Spectrum, **special units or schools were sometimes important to allowing them to access school.** This is because the schools and local authorities were not fully inclusive, despite their best efforts. Special units or schools worked best when the young people could also access other schools or mainstream spaces to gain access to a meaningful curriculum.
12. **Young people need to have access to good courses. The decision about what course to do should be based on the young person not the category of SEN they have.** If young people are seen as unable to take GCSEs or A levels, they need to have access to a good alternative curriculum. In some local authorities alternative provision is reducing.
13. In some contexts too much time is spent on **normalising the SEN of the young people, such as teaching young people on the AS to co-operate.** Instead more effort should be focused on nurturing young people's talents and abilities. Some 'therapies' are needed, but the time dedicated to, and the quality of, these need to be carefully monitored. It should also be carefully monitored whether the people administering these therapies are trained and skilled in these activities.
14. **The implementation of the new Code of Practice (2014) needs careful monitoring and consideration** to avoid exacerbating issues of social exclusion and interconnected social, educational and economic exclusions, for young people with SEN.

Contacts and Further Information

If you have any comments you would like to make about our findings or research, please contact the Principal Investigator, Dr Louise Holt.

We are currently interested in researching the impact of the new SEN Code of Practice on young people with BESD (or Social, Emotional and Mental Health SEMH in the new Code of Practice). Please contact us if you would like to be involved in this new study. We are very keen to hear from education professionals and policy makers for your input into this and future research, so please do get in touch if you have any comments, queries, questions or input.

Further information is available at our website:
www.socialcapital.lboro.ac.uk.webhost1.lboro.ac.uk



The picture on the front is 'friends' made in plasticine by primary school girls, and all photos are taken by young people participating in the project