'Children's embodied social capital and (dis)ability: connecting micro- and macro-scales of inclusion/exclusion.

PROVISIONAL FINDINGS

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Dissemination event: 'Children's embodied social capital and (dis)ability: connecting micro- and macro- scales of inclusion/exclusion.

FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS
1. The importance of friendships cannot be overstated	Take seriously the role of friendships in creating positive experiences of school and therefore educational success and inclusion. A holistic approach is required.
2. Special schools and units provide a necessary haven because the education system is not fully inclusive.	Special schools and units continue to be important for children and young people with AS and BESD but there is a need for all actors to critically assess why this is so. Staff and young people in special schools and units could educate teachers and young people about inclusive practice and/or positive disability awareness.
3. Leisure systems are not fully inclusive	There is a need to review children and young people's access to activities and informal leisure spaces because of the benefits that these offer.
4. Support networks are vitally important but can be difficult to access.	Key actors in schools and LAs need to have knowledge about, and be able to recommend appropriate support groups to families in order to enable all families to access support available.
5. Transport is a key factor in facilitating young people's involvement in activities.	Flexibility in transport provision and equipping children and young people with independent transport skills are important.
6. School based interventions around friendships have variable success.	Non-stigmatizing (whole school) approaches, and techniques that target the environment rather than the individual are best, but there is a need for schools to critically assess whether they work for all children and young people.
7. Key actors are crucial in encouraging young people's social inclusion.	All actors need to work to encourage friendships – often simply presenting opportunities can be effective.
8. Young people create hierarchies of more or less accepted identities.	Children and young people will create hierarchies, but these don't need to be about disability or SEN.
9. Geographical differences persist, giving rise to inequalities in educational experiences.	Geographical differences will exist, but there is a need to communicate more about best practice.
10. Inclusion is difficult to define and implement.	Inclusion is a process rather than an absolute state, it is multi-dimensional and requires cultural and attitudinal change. Inclusive practice is hard to achieve, but is vital.

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KEY FINDINGS

1) The importance of friendships cannot be overstated

- In all of the schools, friendships were valued as a good thing. Children and young people were encouraged to make friends and to have successful friendships.
- Friendships are seen to have benefits such as increasing self-esteem, ensuring the inclusion of the school members and building a sense of community.
- It was generally accepted that being excluded from friendships was detrimental to the children and young people causing them to feel excluded, to have low self-esteem and even causing difficulties with mental health.
- An idea of friendship exists which is based on neurotypical notions of social relations. In many schools, adults had little understanding of the different ways that young people on the Autistic Spectrum (AS) express sociality and that normative expressions of friendship do not always correspond with their expressions of friendship.
- There is generally an interrelationship between positive relationships and friendships at school and positive attitudes towards school and learning. *The importance of friendships for successful education cannot be under-estimated.*

2) Special schools and units provide a necessary haven because the education system is not fully inclusive

- The general perception is that separate schooling for young people with disabilities and/or special educational needs are not best practice because they mean that children and young people are cut off from their local communities. Inclusion is seen to have benefits for the young people themselves and wider society.
- *In practice, the separate schools and units within mainstream schools often offered 'havens' for the young people and their families.*
- In addition, these separate educational spaces were seen as giving the young people the opportunity to make friendships with those who have similar identities and experiences.
- In addition, some units allowed children and young people who were not unit members into them during lunchtimes and breaks. This promoted friendships across the different spaces of the school.
- We were told about many negative experiences in the mainstream schooling system (often in previous schools). Most children who attended special schools had been bullied and excluded in/from mainstream schools by children and adults.
- Often, unit members (students *and* staff) were not fully integrated into the school. This meant that staff and students in the wider school didn't know or understand enough about the kinds of difficulties experienced by the unit members or the work done in the unit.

- Different approaches to discipline and reward between units and the mainstream spaces of schools caused problems, with unit members being sometimes (wrongly) seen to be getting preferential treatment.
- The existence of special units and other separate spaces within schools sometimes made mainstream teachers too ready to send students (especially those with AS or Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties (BESD)) to these separate spaces if their behaviour was disruptive. This resulted in some children not being included in the mainstream for much of their time.
- Some schools had flexible separate spaces, which could be used by all children rather than being based on having a diagnosis of SEN.
- *Schooling systems are not fully inclusive and structural difficulties still remain, which are barriers to inclusion.*

3) Leisure systems are not fully inclusive

- Access to, and availability of, leisure activities is perceived by teachers and other professionals to be differentiated according to class, ethnicity and disability.
- However, of at least equal importance from the perspective of children and their parents/carers is geographical location, the level of involvement of the voluntary sector and school type (e.g. special, mainstream or schools with special units). In particular, special schools often have good links to 'specialist' activities for young people and some LAs have better developed activities for all young people.
- Parent/carer attitudes and support for different activities and/or their level of involvement in activities and/or ability to or willingness to facilitate (practically or financially) young people's involvement in different activities is important.
- Many young people with SENs had fewer opportunities for formal and informal leisure activities than their peers.
- Leisure activities can have practical benefits (e.g. learning skills, accessing information) and social and emotional benefits (e.g. sharing common experiences, doing activities, building confidence). These activities can directly and indirectly help young people to make friends inside and outside school.
- *Geographically, physically and financially accessible leisure spaces are very important.*

4) Support networks (for adults and children and young people) can be difficult to access.

- Support networks and social activities have practical benefits (e.g. accessing funding and support) and social and emotional benefits (e.g. sharing experiences, making friends).
- Support networks were seen to be particularly important for parents/carers of children at special schools (or at special units which were geographically distant from their home), as these parents/carers often did not have the opportunity to make friends at the school gates, or

through school activities. Some parents/carers were not able to work (often due to the lack of availability of appropriate childcare, or due to children's hospital appointments etc.) so were unable to access social relationships in that way either.

- Teachers and other professionals perceived access to, and availability of, support networks (for parents/carers and children and young people) to be differentiated according to class, ethnicity and type of disability. In particular, for example, there were no local or national interest groups for young people or parents/carers of young people with BESD.

- Parents/carers of children and young people with SEN/disabilities have in the past set up groups in response to perceived gaps in support. These groups offered information, support, training, separate activities and childcare, and enabled access to mainstream activities and childcare. The existence of local support groups, and type of support available, was geographically variable.

5) Transport is a key factor in facilitating young people's involvement in activities

- This is especially the case for those travelling a long way to school and/or in rural areas. This was a particular issue for young people dependent upon taxis and buses to get them to and from school.

- Even in more urban areas, the cost and availability of public transport was seen as a barrier to accessing schools and leisure activities/opportunities.

- Some young people were able to arrange their transport to pick them up from a friends' house or an activity which was beneficial.

- Teaching the independent use of transport was seen as crucial to the current and future (social) opportunities of young people with disabilities and/or special educational needs.

6) School based interventions around friendships have variable success

- A variety of techniques were employed to assist children's friendships and social relationships e.g. SEAL, buddying, peer mediation.

- Generally these had positive effects but they were limited sometimes by staff availability, lack of training or children's lack of engagement.

- Interventions were often aimed at the child or young person, rather than external factors such as the environment or others' attitudes. This has the effect of pathologising the child or young person rather than looking at how the setting might be made more inclusive.

- Some whole school (non-stigmatizing) approaches were seen in action (e.g. SEAL, the use of golden time to reward positive behaviour). However, these were sometimes not accessible to all children and young people (e.g. children not being able to follow the rules of circle time).

- The most effective way of encouraging friendships is to present children and young people opportunities to socialise informally or through shared interests and/or activities.

7) **Key actors are crucial in encouraging young people's social inclusion**

- Most often all the adults in schools worked really hard to facilitate children's social relationships.
- In particular support staff such as unit members and learning support assistants played important roles in this.
- Both formal work (such as friendship circles) and informal work (understanding the children and their families, nurturing the children) were found to be important.
- Young people could be unintentionally marginalized by being told to sit in a particular place or sitting with a member of support staff, particularly in mainstream schools with special units.
- In other settings support staff worked with mixed ability groups of children, and young people with SENs were encouraged to work with peers. This was seen to promote the inclusion of these children and young people.
- Key actors saw individualized training and support for staff to be crucial to developing best practice. This training and support enabled the staff to understand the individual needs of the children and young people, and how best to meet them. Learning and development (e.g. via training courses, conferences) was seen to be crucial to building capacity within schools.

8) **Young people create hierarchies of more or less accepted identities**

- Young people created hierarchies among themselves along a variety of grounds in all schools (including special schools).
- One important factor in how valued different young people were was their ability or disability in terms of mind, body or emotional-social characteristics.
- The most consistently devalued identities within mainstream schools are children and young people with socio-emotional differences (such as those diagnosed with BSED).
- Young people with AS also had negative experiences in mainstream school spaces and previous mainstream schools.
- Many adults and children found it difficult to understand the different behaviour of those with BESD, which often challenged notions of acceptable behaviour in school spaces.
- Young people with BESD often had difficult social relationships and difficulties in accessing the curriculum.
- Adults working with young people with BESD, young people and parents/carers claimed that many staff members view BESD as bad behaviour rather than as a disability. However, most young people with BESD wanted to do well at school, but could not conform to expected ways of behaving.
- Positive social relationships outside school with family and friends, particularly those forged in leisure activities are particularly important for

young people with BESD and can help to promote friendships and achieving well at school.
- Young people were more accepting of peers who they knew well and had opportunity to forge a meaningful relationship with.

9) Geographical differences
- There are considerable differences between Local Authorities (LA) in provision for young people and children with disabilities and special educational needs.
- These are due to funding, culture, size of the team, needs within the LA.
- All LAs reported an increase in the number and degree of disabilities and SEN over time.
- LAs have different focuses in their interventions, which leads to quite different experiences for the young people and children.
- Adults in the schools and parents/carers reported quite significant differences in the support they felt they had from the LA.
- There were also differences in experiences in different schools within the same LA and even different sub-spaces of schools (units, classrooms etc.).
- Many professionals suggest that some SENs are more prevalent among families experiencing other problems, especially poverty.

10) Inclusion is difficult to define and implement
- A significant number of different definitions of, and approaches to inclusion were used by key actors.
- These included:
  ⇒ *Environmental* – about the barriers to inclusion that arise from the fabric of school buildings, often historical.
  ⇒ *Attitudinal* – intolerance to difference seen to be widespread among children and young people, also some staff.
  ⇒ *Membership* – making sure all members of the school feel that they have a role to play and that their identity is valid and legitimate within the school.
  ⇒ *Educational* – use of different teaching strategies to cater for all learners, moving away from the 'velcro' model of teaching assistants
  ⇒ *Societal* – approach needed across the whole of society
- The ideals of inclusion that key actors discussed were sometimes difficult to implement in practice, because there was a variety of practices within different in-school spaces (different classrooms, special units, etc.) and in different schools. There are also conflicting pressures on schools and limited resources.

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KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1) **Take seriously the role of friendships in creating positive experiences of school and therefore educational success and inclusion.**
   - A holistic approach is required that considers the social implications of all policy and practice from transport to seating arrangements.
   - Be aware that sociality can be expressed differently by different groups

2) **Special schools and units continue to be important for children and young people with AS and BESD but there is a need for all actors to critically assess why this is so.**
   - Staff and students in special units could educate the rest of the school about their differences and their more positive approaches to discipline.
   - More work is needed to make schools inclusive for young people with AS and BESD

3) **There is a need to review children and young people's access to activities and informal leisure spaces because of the benefits that these offer.**

4) **Key actors in schools and LA's need to have knowledge about, and be able to recommend appropriate support groups to families in order to enable all families to access support available.**

5) **Flexibility in transport provision and equipping children and young people with independent transport skills are important.**
   - Consider issues of cost and transport.
   - Can school transport be more flexible?
   - How can voluntary sector involvement be used – e.g. by promoting activities in schools or forging links between education and the voluntary sector.

6) **Non-stigmatizing (whole school) approaches, and techniques that target the environment rather than the individual are best, but there is a need for schools to critically assess whether they work for all children and young people.**

7) **All actors need to work to encourage friendships – although in some cases simply presenting opportunities can be effective.**
   - Support staff working with small mixed groups, where possible, and educate parents/carers about this

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- Those who work with young people with SEN can educate other teachers to be more accepting and not to unintentionally stigmatize young people.
- Listen to the young people!

8) Children and young people will create hierarchies, but these don't need to be about disability or SEN.
- Provide opportunity for friendships based around activities or interest
- Avoid structures that prevent friendships between young people with and without SEN, where possible
- Realize that hierarchies are reproduced in special schools and units, also around mind-body-emotional difference.
- Use units as an opportunity to educate about differences affirmatively.

9) Geographical differences will exist, but there is a need to communicate more about best practice
- Best practice involves individual responses to particular children and young persons' needs.
- Training and development of key adults is crucial in improving the experiences of children and young people.
- Professionals need support as well as parents/carers and children and young people.

10) Inclusion is a process rather than an absolute state, it is multi-dimensional and requires cultural and attitudinal change. Inclusive practice is hard to achieve, but is vital.
- Children and young people need to be understood as individuals, rather than in terms of their needs/abilities.