

WHOSE VOICE IS IT ANYWAY?

This is a short version of a piece of research carried out by two disabled researchers, Rowen Jade and Christine Wilson. They were helped and advised by a group of young disabled people and their friends called 'Young and Powerful'.

ROWEN SAID: I was one of the few disabled children who went to mainstream schools in the 1970/80s. I had never been to a special school, so I thought I would start my research there.

This was easier said than done!

I wrote hundreds of letters to Special Schools, but very few answered. Of those which did, many were not keen to let me talk to the young people. Some said it would be too disruptive, and some said their pupils were too disabled to be asked what they think about their schooling: "You have to understand that many of our pupils cannot be included".

Even when schools had made appointments with me, they often cancelled them at the last minute. One school which was several hours drive away, told me when I got there that the person I had come to see was not there, and no-one else could talk to me either. In one school the secretary asked me to wait out in the Car Park until the teacher was ready for me.

A few schools did invite me in. In one, in which I was invited to their Open Day, most of the parents and staff assumed that I was an ex-pupil. When I finally got irritated with their pride in me, they realised their mistake and wouldn't let me talk to any of the pupils.

Because I persisted, I did get to spend some time with staff and pupils in a variety of schools, however, in every school it was almost impossible for me to talk to the young people on their own.

This is what I saw:

"They don't listen." Project worker:
"They don't listen to you? Do you think they
listen to other children?" "Yes"
Project worker: "Do you think they don't
listen because you don't speak?" "Yes"
Project worker"
"What do think might help them listen to
you? any ideas?" "To not think I'm a
baby"
Girl year 7

- Most staff in Special Schools are enthusiastic, dedicated and proud of what they do.
- Young deaf people in a residential school which is 'oralist' (wants the children to speak and not sign) are very isolated, even from each other.
- Any problems they had were blamed on their hearing aids not working.
- The system of hearing aids, headphones and microphones meant that all communication had to go through a 'hearing' adult.
- Young people in a residential school for people with learning difficulties named an adult member of staff as their 'best friend'.
- In one school I saw very inappropriate sexual behaviour between an older student and a member of staff. No one seemed to notice.

- Although these students went out to join local mainstream clubs and events, they did not appear to have made friends with non-disabled young people through these activities.

- Many staff had low expectations of their pupils abilities and behaviour. Some expressed great surprise when they did what I asked them.

- Many young people in the special schools thought I was a young person too, probably because they had never met a disabled adult before.

- This lack of positive role models seems frightening for young people. One girl asked me "when will my parents stop loving me?" and when I asked her what had made her think that they would, she said "You never see a disabled adult being loved do you?"

Overall, I felt that I was being treated with great disrespect as a young disabled woman myself. I was in fact being treated the same way they treat their pupils. This, together with the over-protectiveness from both staff and parents made me feel sad and depressed. I felt I was being prevented from helping the young people, and I finally decided to resign from the project.

When Rowen left the project we all had a rethink. We felt it was really important to continue and to try and meet with young disabled people in mainstream schools and units. We were lucky enough to be able to employ Christine Wilson to carry out the second half of the project *I* and to write the report. The first thing Christine did was to go to our advisory group of young people 'Young and Powerful' to ask their advice.

YOUNG AND POWERFUL SAID

For young people in school to feel safe to talk they should-

- Each be sent a letter explaining what the project is all about (no BIG publicity in the school)
- Have no adults, (teachers or parents) present unless the child has chosen them as a facilitator
- Have control over the interviews
- Be interviewed in groups, not alone
- Be allowed to choose a friend to be with them if they want
- Be interviewed in a private space
- Not be named in the report

The questions they felt should be asked were:

- What the young people liked about their school
- Their views on access to the environment and activities
- The attitudes of people at school towards them
- Relationships with teachers and helpers
- Friendships with other young people
- How well their communication needs were met
- How negative aspects of the school could be improved

"This is a lot different from my other school. It's just got everything that disabled people need to get around. Understanding teachers, friends.. lifts and ramps are really helpful." Girl -year 8

"They don't treat you like animals in this school. With other people in the street, they gawp at you and that, but in this school they really care for you... they treat you like a human being." Boy -primary school

"The amount of support we get is phenomenal, I don't know if there is any other school that gives so much support... It's the best school I know of for supporting both able-bodied and special needs pupils as well." Boy - year 9

You have a special teacher in history in the main school, she sits next to me and helps me spell words that I can't spell"
Young people- year 9

The group made a video which was designed to be shown at the beginning of the interviews to help the young people to get started. It consisted of scenes of exclusion/inclusion which they were sure would be familiar to many of the young people.

The response of Mainstream 'Inclusive' Schools was markedly different to the Special Schools. Many were willing to help set up diverse groups of young people, and often identified young people who "Had a lot to say for themselves"

48 young people took part. They were aged between 9 and 16, and experienced a range of impairments including autism, Down's Syndrome, language and speech difficulties, visual impairment and mobility impairments. Some required facilitated communication. They came from different backgrounds and cultures including African-Caribbean, Asian and white British communities.

THE MAINSTREAM STUDENTS SAID:

What they liked about their school :

- They like going to schools in which disabled and non- disabled young people could mix
- They generally appreciated their issues being taken seriously on a 'whole school' level

- They appreciated the range of subjects and activities, especially those pupils who had transferred from special schools
- The disabled young people did not like to 'stand out' in any way and appreciated being included in all activities including sports and PE

Their views on access to the environment and activities:

- Many students stressed how important physical access is to their sense of inclusion. In many schools which were supposed to be accessible, there were still many difficulties to be overcome
- Many students were not impressed by the technology available to them. They said that sometimes it was helpful, but it often caused jealousy amongst their friends. Often it broke down or was too limited in scope

The attitude of people at school toward them:

- Many young people said they were treated well ("Not like animals") in their schools
- They felt that pupils with hidden, or 'invisible' conditions were more vulnerable to resentment and bullying than young people with more obvious impairments
- Some of the non-disabled young people had got into trouble for defending their disabled friends from bullies, but this support was greatly appreciated by the friends concerned!

Relationships with teachers and helpers:

- Many students said they appreciated direct help with their learning difficulties, or with behaviour difficulties such as losing concentration
- They had mixed feelings about non-teaching assistants who sometimes did things they would rather do for each other.
- They liked it best when the helpers were 'on hand' rather than taking control. They said they wanted help, not supervision.

- They preferred it when they had some control over who their helper was
- Some young people said their teachers treated them like "Babies", giving them work which was too easy and not expecting enough of them. This was particularly true for students with speech and language difficulties, or who used wheelchairs.
- Some young people thought their teachers relied too much on their helpers for adapting their work and helping them keep up.
- Some felt they were always left to last in the class and had to really fight for the teachers attention, which they resented

Friendships with other young people:

- All the young people said they had friends in school
- The young people who were taught in a separate unit within mainstream only made friends within the unit.

"When people are shouting and the teacher can't hear us, they ignore us." ... They think we're not normal." Young people-year 9 & 10

"Some teachers just think that if they've got a helper they need anything else." Girl Year 10

"They sit at the and I sit right at the front and they'd be going backwards and forwards to explain it to me but the teacher would tell her off " "And she'd say "what are you disturbing her for?" and I'd say "I'm trying to help, that's your job, you're supposed to be teaching."
Girls Year 10

"Some of them are pretty good, the ones who say, 'I'll sit behind you if you want any help just call me'. That sometimes works OK." There are a lot of good LSAs who do exactly what you ask them to do and they'll help but not help too much".

"I'm not disabled but I think it would be better, perhaps, if you get the right ISA that you like, then you can form a good relationship with them and they'll know what you want them to do and they'll know when to help and to leave you alone, and things that you want them to do."
Young People Years 9 & 10

They felt that they were stigmatised within the school and called names by the other students

- The majority of young people said it was easier making friends if you went to your local school, or you went to the school to which all your friends from primary school went. Having older brothers and sisters in the school also helped
- Some non-disabled, and some disabled children had learned to facilitate each other, sometimes better than the adults. They were proud of this. Many young people felt however that the help they gave each other was not valued and seen as interference by adults.
- Many young people said that the support of parents was very important if they were to develop their friendships naturally into out-of-school relationships. They talked about making their homes accessible and welcoming to wheelchair users, and of the importance of parents of disabled children allowing their friends to stay-over

How negative aspects of the school could be improved:

- All the young people agreed that they were given too much homework!
- Most suggestions for improvement were implied by the things the young people said were wrong.

Rowen and Christine also asked the young people if they would be interested in forming a network with other disabled young people in other schools. Most said they would be interested, but not in a support group. They said they wanted to help younger, or less 'empowered' young people, to fight for their rights.

'Young and Powerful', a group of disabled and non-disabled young people who go to mainstream schools felt that what was needed was a mixed group which could fight for young people's rights, including the right to go to school together.

CHRISTINE SAID:

The most important thing we learned from this project is that without respect, it is impossible for young people to have a voice in the design of their own futures. Young people in mainstream schools had both praise and criticism for the adults who worked with them, but they were empowered to make their views known in a public report. In stark contrast the young disabled people in Christine Wilson segregated schools were disempowered and denied the opportunity to speak their minds to an independent disabled researcher. We are still told what these young people think and want by the non-disabled adults who surround them.

This project has shown that the Special Education System is still based on the 'medical model' of disability which leads to focus on people's impairments and supposed limitations. The difference in attitude of 'untrained' mainstream staff is the biggest asset of inclusive education. Although the young people's comments show that there is much to be learnt about disability and inclusion, it is clear that the expertise is there in the young people themselves, not in the so-called SEN experts. Let us all work together to strengthen that voice to the utmost.

"Sometimes I wish I never had none, (a support teacher). Sometimes I wish I was on my own there with my friends so they could help me".

"Opening doors is a problem. But friends open doors." Girl - Year 10



THE KEY TO INCLUSION IS RESPECT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

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