

What factors are key to a positive experience of mainstream schooling? An exploratory study around young people with learning difficulties

What we found

“As long as we know the child really well, then we can support them well”
(School Staff)

Young people talked about having good relationships with staff they could talk to, those who were interested in them as individuals. Staff emphasised the need to understand and respect the young person. Specialist staff were crucial as a bridge to wider school staff, providing support to the young person or to the wider staff to facilitate their relationships with each other.

Part of the respect that staff showed for the young people was supporting young people’s agency. Young people had ownership over their learning environment and the supports they received. This was underpinned by the ability and willingness of the schools to be flexible, to adapt the support that was provided, to tailor staff roles in relation to particular children and to offer the young people choices.

The overall feel of the school was important to the young people, their parents and the school staff. A positive commitment to diversity was a key component; interviewees suggested that being different was normal, everyone was an individual, contributing to a sense of inclusiveness.

“So this school’s really helpful, any which way”
(Young Person)

Academic achievement was important but so was contribution to the school community. Staff talked about finding out young people’s strengths and giving them opportunities to use these.

“Being able to listen to your point of view, recognise that you had some expertise in regard to your children [...] and then between us coming to some sort of plan that seemed sensible.”
(Parent)

Parents were positive about how staff interacted with their children and with themselves. Parents felt like they were working in partnership.

Having an overall positive experience did not mean there were never times of challenge. The positive relationships appeared to be key to tackling such challenges and moving forward.

Recommendations for future research

Future research should focus on the relationships and institutional structures which enable a positive experience of mainstream schooling to be sustained through times of challenge. If schools can identify and understand the factors that support individuals to have continuing positive experiences, then these approaches can be implemented systematically.

How we carried out the research

Four young people and their parents were recruited for the study from secondary schools. We invited young people to take part on the basis of suggestions from schools of young people they thought were likely to describe themselves as having a mostly positive experience. We spoke to the young people, and to a parent of each young person, about what was good about school.

We asked each young person and their parent to suggest people who had contributed to the positive experience. We carried out eight further interviews with school staff following these suggestions.

Why it matters – our rationale for the research

Between 2015 and 2017 Salvesen Mindroom Centre and Salvesen Mindroom Research Centre, together with the James Lind Alliance, conducted a priority setting exercise to identify the top ten research priorities for learning difficulties. Over 800 questions were received during this exercise.

Several questions were identified as being ‘out of scope’ for the priority setting exercise itself. Salvesen Mindroom Centre themed these questions into three areas of further interest and commissioned the Childhood and Youth Studies Research Group (University of Edinburgh) to conduct scoping studies in these areas. The purpose of these scoping studies was to identify gaps in knowledge and key questions for future research. The quality of communication between parents, children and young people and professionals was the overwhelming theme which arose in all three scoping studies.

This study explored the components which contribute to a young person’s positive experience of mainstream schooling. In particular we looked at the people and the relationships who were important to young people, as well as aspects of the school institution.

Thank you

This research could not have taken place without the generosity of the young people, parents and professionals who took part. Thank you for your time and your willingness to share your stories and insights.

This briefing focuses on the first of three scoping studies on the experiences of children with learning difficulties, and their families, in Scotland. Full findings for all three exploratory studies are found in the report: ‘Communication matters’ available at

www.mindroom.org/index.php/help_and_support/research

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www.ed.ac.uk/education/childhood-and-youth-studies