

What about us?

Annie Makoff speaks to Research Programme Manager, Jill Davies, about a study which gives a voice to children who feel unsafe at school

More and more children with special educational needs are entering mainstream schools than ever before. Children with Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, those on the Autistic Disorder Spectrum, and those with ADHD, to name but a few, are now catered for and provided with, on the whole, adequate provision within the confines of the school. Some children may require one to one support during lesson time, while others may require extra tuition outside of class. Whatever the educational need, inclusion is becoming a common practice within mainstream schools.

Yet, according to a recent study, *What About Us?* carried out by the Foundation for People with Learning

Disabilities and the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, many children still feel unsafe within the school during unstructured periods.

Attending school is a daunting experience for many pupils, especially during the transition from primary to secondary school. But for many with a special educational need, the experience can prove to be a real challenge.

What About Us? came from two previous investigations carried out by the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities, *Count us In* (2001) and *Making us Count* (2005). These studies focused on the mental health of people with learning disabilities. The findings of these studies raised many questions as to the emotional state of such students, and so further research was proposed.

Jill Davies, Research Programme Manager for the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities, says, "although there had been work addressing the academic gain for people with disabilities in mainstream schools, I think hardly anyone at all had been looking at their emotional well-being."

The research, carried out in nine mainstream schools and colleges in Cambridge, Plymouth and Leeds (chosen to reflect a diverse range of students with different ethnicities) was conducted as an 'action research' format,

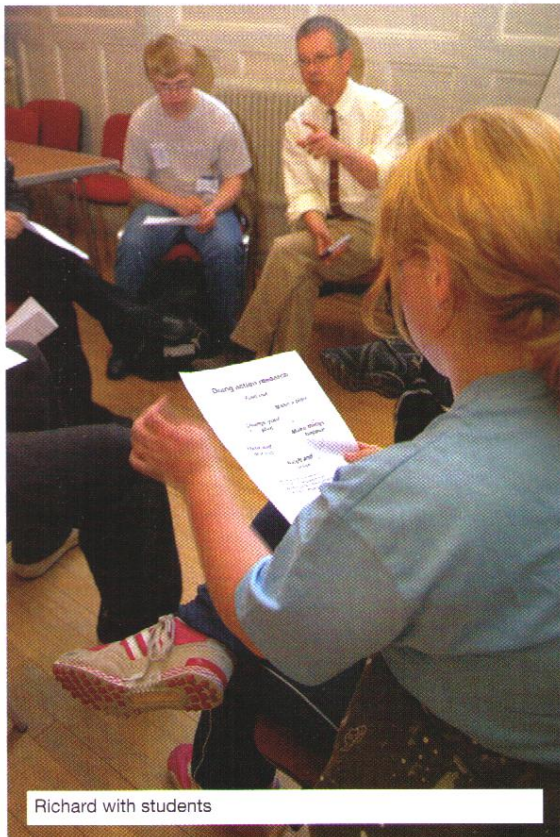
the standard methodology used for problem-solving in social theory. The teacher-researchers, asked small groups of young people of 13 years and up, and put questions to them about their experience of school.

"The young people actually liked having a voice, quite often they had never been asked an opinion about anything before," Jill Davies says. "They really valued having a voice and that played a big part in boosting their self esteem and confidence."

The main key finding to come out of the two-year research was that the unstructured times "caused the most anxiety. The break times, the lunchtimes, the transitions between classes, moving in corridors..."

For a child with a special educational need, the times between the lessons were the most daunting. The classroom provided the routine and the structure and teaching assistants were available for the individual child. But outside of this, there is often little in place in the way of support. Children reported feeling highly anxious and voiced fears of bullying and victimisation. Outside the classroom, such children simply did not feel safe.

But it was actually the children themselves that came up with the ideas and possible solutions to improve the situation. Some suggested having the use of the library or IT suite during break times and lunch times, and others wanted more activities and clubs to get involved in. The participating schools and colleges implemented these ideas, and by doing so, anxiety in these children was much reduced.



Richard with students

Other ideas involved introducing 'buddy schemes' where older or more socially adept children were paired with those with learning disabilities and were able to support them during non-classroom periods. This proved a better alternative than having classroom assistants attend the children during

their lunch times which, for young people, would have proved humiliating. As Jill Davies points out, "it's not really cool to have an adult Velcro-ed to you in the playground, is it?"

The findings for the What About Us? study really highlighted the value of giving young people a voice. Many came up with really good, innovative ideas which cost little to implement, including giving young people with learning disabilities a place on the school council, to act as a liaison between other children with learning disabilities and the school management. One school that had implemented this was advised by a student on the school council, that the way information was presented isolated those who found reading and writing difficult. Minutes of school council meetings were then put up on school notice boards in an easy-to-read format for every student to read and understand.

The *What About Us?* report recommends the following for schools and colleges:

- Giving young people a voice and listening to their ideas for improvement

- Getting young people involved in carrying out action research
- Getting young people involved in the decision making processes
- Improving the way information for students is presented, taking into account those students with reading and communication difficulties
- Celebrating the success and achievement of children with learning disabilities, not just of those students who reach top grades

Encouraging students to play an active role in improving their environment is essential for learning. "Give them a chance to try out new ways to improve their well being" Jill Davies advises. "You're not going to learn if you're feeling highly stressed or worried."

The *What About Us?* report and all the findings are fully documented on the website that was launched in October. The site, www.whataboutus.org.uk, written and designed with the advice of young people, is accessible in three layer formats: for students with learning disabilities, for students wanting to find out more, and for teachers and special needs staff. It also features case studies, advice and top tips for young people such as 'feeling good about yourself' and 'make a difference'.

The *What About Us?* study wants to spread the message of giving young people a voice to all schools and colleges worldwide. Everyone can make a difference: everyone can get their school to conduct action research workshops and improve the well being of children with special educational needs.

As Jill Davies explains, "It is something that schools and colleges need to address, to make sure that they are trying different ways to improve people's experience at lunch times and break times." **S**

www.whataboutus.org.uk