Inclusion as a transaction between child and school: uncovering the invisible facilitators of social interaction during a school-link programme.

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The paper draws on the author’s research undertaken for a Master’s dissertation in a special school for children with physical and communication disabilities where the author is a teaching assistant. Weekly visits from the local mainstream school by Key Stage 2 pupils (known as the ‘school-link programme’) prompted an exploration of the ways in which disabled children shape social interaction with both disabled and mainstream peers.

In recognising disabled children as active agents, the paper examines the children’s role as facilitators of their social interaction thereby contributing to emerging literature in the field of critical disability studies by challenging the disabled/able dichotomy and misconception of disabled children as homogenous passive subjects. The author explores how the school supports the realisation of the children’s agency for shaping their own social interaction and reflects on the extent to which the school-link programme provided opportunities for social interaction between the disabled children and their mainstream peers.

The paper draws on data from an ethnographic case study in which the author primarily uses participant observation. The researcher’s immersion in the children’s lives, interpretation of non-verbal communication and on-going reflection on the children’s behaviour is central to the methodology. The paper examines how this context-sensitive methodology and the researcher’s job role and skillset uncovers the otherwise ‘silent’ voices of disabled children and reflects the constantly evolving transactional process of inclusion (Nind 2010). Findings from the study suggest that children use their agency to facilitate social participation by employing practices which reflect their own values and the extent to which the school realises children’s agency may be a reflection of the alignment between the school’s values and that of the child’s.

Such findings draw our attention to the disabled children’s capacity to construct perceptions of themselves and their peers and their abilities to use these perceptions to shape their own lives, as well as the lives of others. Thus, the study highlights the importance of overcoming the methodological challenges implicit in carrying out inclusive research on disabled children’s experiences. Furthermore, it demonstrates how research does not need to rely on proxies such as family members or mainstream children but that with the use of more creative child-centred methods and a skilled, observant, and immersed researcher, the voices of disabled children can be directly heard.