Special or Unique

Young People's Attitudes to Disability

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Acknowledgements

About Disability Rights UK

We are disabled people leading change, working for equal participation for all. Disability Rights UK is led by people with diverse experiences of disability and health conditions, from different communities. We work with allies committed to equal participation for all.

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About LKMco

This report was supported by LKMco. LKMco is an education and youth 'think and action-tank'. We believe society should ensure all children and young people receive the support they need to make a fulfilling transition to adulthood.

We provide the evidence and support policy makers and practitioners need to support young people.

We use our timely and rigorous research to get under the skin of issues affecting young people in order to shape the public debate, advise the sector and campaign on topical issues. We have a particular interest in issues affecting marginalised young people.

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Contents

Foreword

SUE BOTT, HEAD OF POLICY AND RESEARCH, DISABILITY RIGHTS UK

I have been a disabled person from birth and have experienced first-hand the special education system. In the 1960s it was all about segregation and a system that worked against disabled young people being able to achieve anything.

I was lucky that my parents fought for me to attend the only special school for visually impaired kids where you could take exams and aim for university. Even so it was assumed we would take longer and therefore we were all two years behind our able-bodied peers. There was little interaction with the able-bodied world and certainly no interaction with disabled adults. When I eventually made it to university I met a student who had gone to the able-bodied school next door. He confessed he and his mates used to move as far away as they could if they saw us going into town on the bus.

So surely today things have improved? Unfortunately, what this research shows is that not that much has changed. Yes, more disabled children are educated in mainstream schools, but their experience is not all that different from what I experienced.

The research shows that SEND pupils do not consider themselves to be disabled not from the belief that disability is somehow no longer relevant but because of their negative feelings towards disability generally.

This accords very well with how I felt as a child. At my school I'm ashamed to say we had a hierarchy – visually impaired at the top, wheelchair users in the middle, and those with other impairments at the bottom. I had notions of waking up one day with perfect vision and therefore able to join the elite able-bodied and leave my special school. And yes, we went in for bullying too.

This research should be a wake-up call or else we find yet another generation of disabled young people experiencing the same negative attitudes and behaviours. It's only when you can accept yourself as who you are, a valued disabled person, that progress can be made. Then you can stop apologising for yourself and rejecting the support that helps with everyday life.

This research should be a wake-up call or else we find yet another generation of disabled young people experiencing the same negative attitudes and behaviours.

We need disability to be understood and a valued part of the school environment. We need more interaction between all young people, and we need young disabled people to have the opportunity to draw support from disabled adults. If we fail to have an education system that is truly inclusive of disabled young people, that values disabled young people for who they are, and enables disabled people to reach their full potential then our efforts to realise the human, social and economic rights of disabled people will always be limited.

Executive Summary

This report describes the findings from a series of focus groups with young people within and without special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), conducted by researchers from Disability Rights UK and LKMco. It provides insights into the school experience of young people with SEND, and the attitudes that disabled and non-disabled young people have about people with disabilities.

KEY FINDINGS

Most pupils, regardless of school type or SEND status, saw themselves as mostly different from disabled people. Pupils with and without SEND were similar in their self-descriptions, interests and views of education.

- Few pupils with SEND identified themselves as disabled or described themselves by referring to a disability or impairment, and most viewed themselves as distinct from disabled people.
- Most pupils we spoke to with and without SEND defined disability by the use of aids, particularly wheelchairs.
- Pupils with SEND who received extra support or reasonable adjustments were not sure why they received them and what they were for.

Pupils with SEND described being bullied and socially excluded within their school, and having relatively few friends. Pupils without SEND expressed neutral-to-positive attitudes about disabled people, but were not friends with disabled people.

- Pupils with SEND in mainstream schools were largely excluded from the larger social networks in their schools.
- Pupils with SEND want their schools to be more proactive in facilitating their social and educational inclusion and reducing bullying.
- SEND pupils in mainstream schools would spontaneously describe specific incidents or forms of bullying they had experienced
- SEND pupils in special schools talked about being victims of bullying or witnessing bullying, but did not always describe this clearly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ISSUE	ACTIONS
Bullying and social inclusion	**School leaders should:** • Encourage more active interventions by teachers to address bullying and social exclusion in the classroom, and promote inclusive classroom environments. • Support pupils, particularly pupils with SEND, to develop personal skills and coping mechanisms to mitigate the impact of bullying.
	The Department for Education should: • Develop SEND-specific anti-bullying practice guidance.
Young people's awareness of disability	**School leaders should:** • Foster greater openness about SEND and disability in the school, and support pupils with SEND to understand their own disability. • Involve local disabled people's organisations in the delivery of PSHE lessons on disability.
	The Department for Education should: • Establish a minimum inclusion standard for disability awareness in the PSHE curriculum, and encourage schools to work with local disabled people's organisations to deliver that curriculum.
	Disabled people's organisations should: • Engage with schools, multi-academy trusts and local authorities to co-develop and co-deliver PSHE curriculums on disability. • Create in-school programmes to mentor pupils with disabilities.

1 Introduction

This report explores young disabled people's educational experiences, as well as young people's attitudes towards disability and disabled people. The findings in this report provide a vital insight into the school experience of young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

We found that pupils with SEND want schools to do more to support both social and educational inclusion and reduce bullying. Young people with SEND did not identify as disabled, in some cases disavowing any similarities with disabled people they knew, and were reluctant to discuss their disability, or link their disability to the support and adjustments they received in class (which they were more open about).

Young people without SEND had largely positive views about disabled people in general, but their peers with disability were just "other people in school", rather than friends.

The aim of this research is to help education practitioners and policymakers better understand how they can support young disabled people and improve attitudes towards disabled people in school, and to let the experience of young disabled people guide that process.

1.1 BACKGROUND

There has been little research on the views of disabled children about their own disability or disabilities more generally. Existing research has often been conducted in the home, rather than in school (e.g. Connors & Stalker, 2007; Garth & Aroni, 2003), and research in school settings has not featured a non-disabled comparator group (e.g. Davis & Watson, 2001).

There is some research on how non-disabled children see their disabled peers at school, although the ways in which attitudes are defined and measured differ greatly between different studies, and research post-2010 is lacking, particularly in the UK (research from other countries includes Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl, & Petry, 2011 on attitudes in Belgium; Bossaert, de Boer, Frostad, Pijl, & Petry, 2015 on attitudes in Belgium, the Netherlands and Norway; a systematic review of mostly American research by de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2012; de Laat, Freriksen, & Vervloed, 2013 from the Netherlands; Yu, Ostrosky, & Fowler, 2012 with highlights from American studies). This research is largely survey-based, and non-disabled children typically report neutral-to-positive attitudes about their disabled peers.

There is likewise a substantial body of personal writing by disabled adults reflecting on their time at school. While useful, and at its best is both insightful and emotionally powerful, a writer (or other form of artist) recalling their time at school decades after they left has to contend with both the fog of memory and a changes in education policy and practice.

Recent research indicates that disabled children are more likely to be victims of bullying (Chatzitheochari, Parsons, & Platt, 2016) and be less socially popular than their non-disabled peers (Hodkinson, 2007), suggesting that the positive-to-neutral attitudes about disability and inclusion expressed by young people in surveys are not translated into everyday social interactions at school.

We hope this report will help to fill in some of the gaps in existing research, providing insights into how disabled and non-disabled children think about disability, and suggesting ways for teachers, policy makers and disabled people's organisations to improve attitudes to disability amongst children and young people.

2 Methodology

Researchers from Disability Rights UK and LKMco conducted focus groups with young people with and without Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), aged roughly 12–14, across England during the autumn and spring terms of the 2018-19 school year.

The focus groups asked about pupil's sense of self, their experiences at school, what they think of their peers and classmates, and their views on disability and disabled people.

The focus groups took place in both mainstream and special schools. We conducted eleven focus groups with three to four pupils per group. Pupils were asked questions that required a mixture of verbal responses and pictorial activities.

> For a full discussion of the research methodology, including the ethical tools used and the sampling method, see Appendix 1.

2.1 PROJECT AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This report explores three key research questions:

1. **What attitudes do disabled children hold about themselves and their disability?**
a. How do disabled young people think of themselves?
b. How, if at all, do they feel their impairment affects their life?
c. How do disabled children feel they are treated in school?
d. How would disabled children like to be treated in school?
2. **What attitudes do disabled children hold about other disabled children?**
a. How do they view other disabled children with the same or similar disabilities?
b. How do they view children with different disabilities from them?

3. **What attitudes do non-disabled pupils hold about their disabled classmates/ disabled people/disability in general?**
a. What do non-disabled children think about their disabled peers?
b. How do non-disabled children feel they typically treat their disabled peers?
c. What are non-disabled children's experiences of working with their disabled peers in school?
d. What are non-disabled children's experiences of socialising with their disabled peers in school?

2.2 STEERING GROUP

Five disabled young people participated in a round-table discussion on the issues affecting them, and reviewed our proposed questions and activities. For example, based on feedback from the steering group we revised our research to include questions about pupils' social status in their school.

2.3 PARTICIPANTS

Participants included:

- 13 SEND pupils in mainstream schools
- 15 SEND pupils in special schools
- 14 non-SEND pupils in mainstream schools

2.4 ANALYSIS

Focus groups were recorded and transcribed and coded using Dedoose.

> For a full list of the codes used (and themes identified), please see Appendix 2.

2.5   ETHICS

The voices and experiences of young people were central to our research approach and informed our methods.

The Disability Research on Independent Living and Learning (DRILL) programme which funded this research project was set up to support research that makes the views, experiences and priorities of disabled people central to that research.

The DRILL ethics committee provided ethical oversight and approval for this project.

We sought consent from schools, the parents of the young people who participated in focus groups, and the young people themselves.

We used a visual aid, a "research journey map" developed by Kate Bowen-Viner from LKMco for this project, to walk participants through the research process and show why we wanted to speak to them and what we would do with the information they told us.

The research journey map and the other consent tools we used are available in Appendix 3.

3 What attitudes do disabled children hold about themselves and their disability?

SUMMARY

- The young people with SEND we spoke to did not identify themselves as disabled to us, or talk about their disabilities when describing themselves

- The young people with SEND we spoke to tended to emphasise personality traits, hobbies and non-academic interests when defining themselves

- Most of the young people with SEND we spoke to described being bullied and socially excluded at school

- They tended to describe their friendship group at school as small or non-existent

- Many of the young people with SEND we spoke to appeared unaware of the specifics of their disability or why they were receiving the support and reasonable accommodations they did

3.1 HOW DO DISABLED YOUNG PEOPLE THINK OF THEMSELVES?

SEND pupils in mainstream schools

People, including parents and teachers, often define young disabled people by their disabilities (Connors & Stalker, 2007). However, young disabled people themselves do not necessarily find their disability a particularly interesting part of themselves.

Previous research exploring young disabled people's experience of disability, such as projects by Connors and Stalker (2007) and Priestley, Corker, & Watson (1999), found that for at least some young disabled people their disability was "not a 'big deal'" and that given the chance they would not get rid of their disability (Connors & Stalker, 2007, p. 25).

Resonating with previous research (Connors & Stalker, 2007; Priestley et al., 1999), SEND pupils in mainstream schools did not directly refer to their disability when asked to talk about themselves, and rarely included it in their drawing or writing.

When describing themselves, they emphasised:

- Their interests and hobbies
- Personality traits that they thought made them stand out
- School subjects they did well in

Most disabled children have their disability from birth or from a very young age. Thus, their experience of being disabled is the only way of being in the world that they know, making it their default way of being, rather than a new and possibly alien experience; for many disabled children their impairment feels natural and "normal". Literature on disabled children's identity suggests other strands of their identity are more important, provided they are receiving sufficient support or adjustment (Priestley, 1998), and our findings were consistent with that literature.

Disability disclosure

Previous research has found that some children with invisible disabilities would categorically not describe themselves as disabled (Priestley et al., 1999; Watson et al., 2001), an option that children with visible disabilities or aids cannot exercise. For example, one pupil with SEND when asked about what made them stand out replied "hearing aids", referring to a disability aid they felt self-conscious about, but not their disability itself. This suggests they were frustrated at how their hearing aids reveal the fact of their hearing impairment to other people, rather than letting them decide who they did or did not tell about their hearing impairment. As Lingsom describes, "[p]ersons with visible impairments are routinely met with preconceived notions others entertain of them by virtue of seeing a sign of impairment" (2008, p. 3).

Research on disability disclosure has focused on employment and post-secondary education settings, but indicates that privacy and control can motivate non-disclosure for many disabled people (Brohan et al., 2012) and there is no reason to believe that young disabled people think any differently.

A hearing impairment is effectively invisible, and can even be hidden from others through lipreading, but a hearing aid is a visual marker of impairment and of being different from most of one's peers. While people with invisible disabilities can choose to reveal or mask their disability, those with visible disabilities lack that agency and control (Lingsom, 2008; Valeras, 2010). Stigma about disability can act as a barrier to social interaction between disabled and non-disabled people (Shakespeare, 2014, p. 199), and disability aids can prompt that stigma.
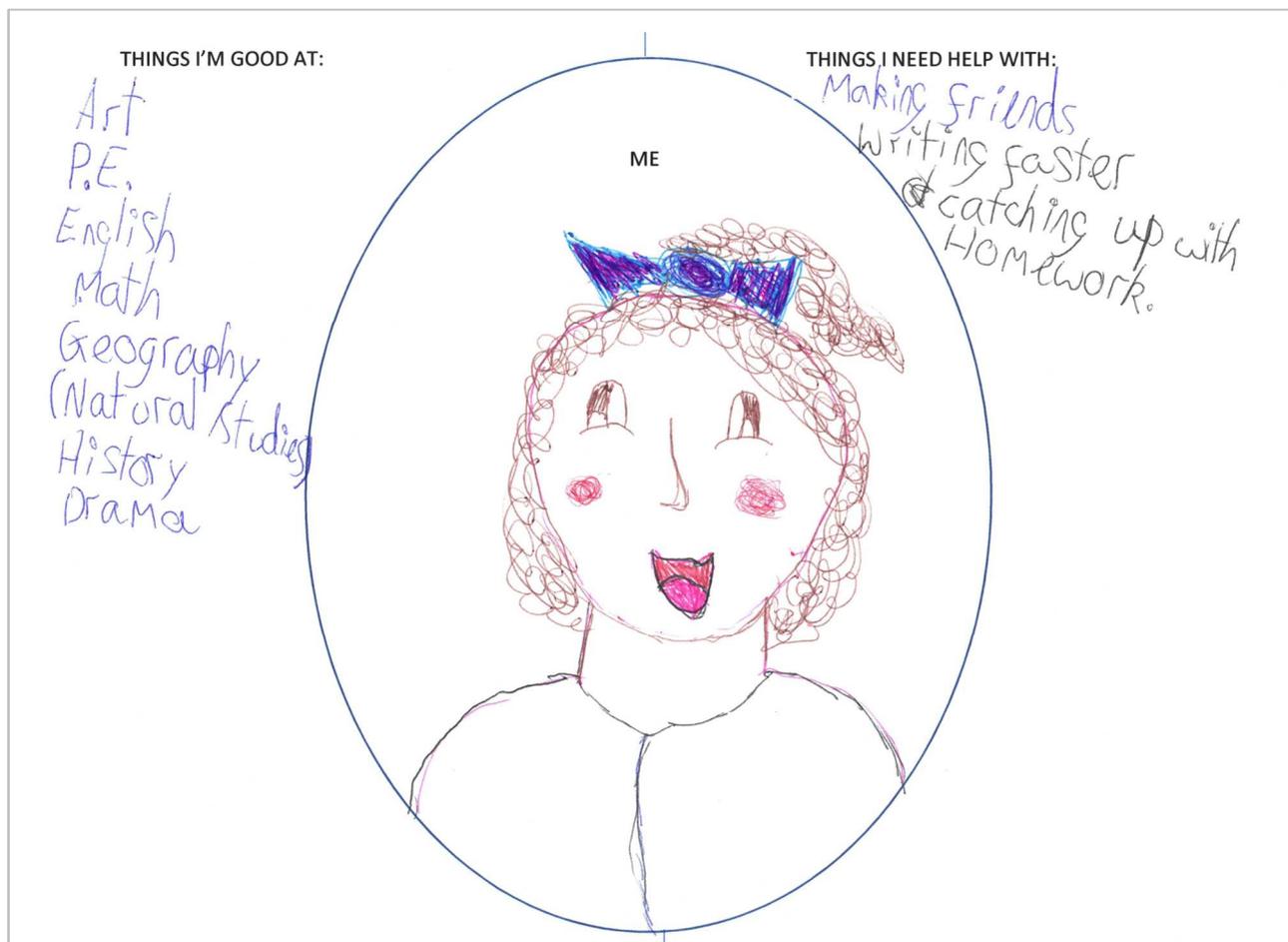

Figure 1 – A self portrait of a SEND pupil in a mainstream school. Note the list of things they are good at on the left of the image, and the things they need help with on the right. This pupil only listed school subjects as things they are good at.

As we found in our research, and in line with existing literature (for example see Watson, 2002), many disabled people, including those with visible disabilities, do not necessarily think of themselves as disabled.

Self-description

As with non-SEND pupils (see page 15), SEND pupils tended to define themselves by their interests and strengths, or by personality traits. When defining themselves by personality traits, some SEND participants described themselves as "annoying", "lazy" or "unique", amongst other terms, often using an ironic tone of voice to do so.

These may be indirect references to their disability, using gallows humour to maintain a degree of levity about something that they may be frustrated by or experience bullying because of. A search of the literature did not reveal other examples of disabled people using the same terms to describe themselves, but "unique" is a synonym for "special" (Merriam-Webster Thesaurus, 2019; OED Online, 2019), one of the most widely used euphemisms for disability. Other descriptors used by pupils with SEND appear synonymous to words like "crippled" or "queer", which have negative connotations and have been "reclaimed" as positive identities (Garland-Thomson, 2005; Mairs, 1986).

The use of phrases like "annoying" or "lazy" indicates that some pupils with SEND could have a sense of humour about their disability, even if they are unclear what exactly their disability is. There is minimal literature on disability and humour, although Rieger (2015) found that disabled children had a sense of humour about their own disabilities.

Talking about their disability in a self-deprecating manner could indicate a lack of personal clarity around their disability, a defensive technique to avoid being judged or stigmatised, an attempt at humour, or combinations thereof, fitting within the
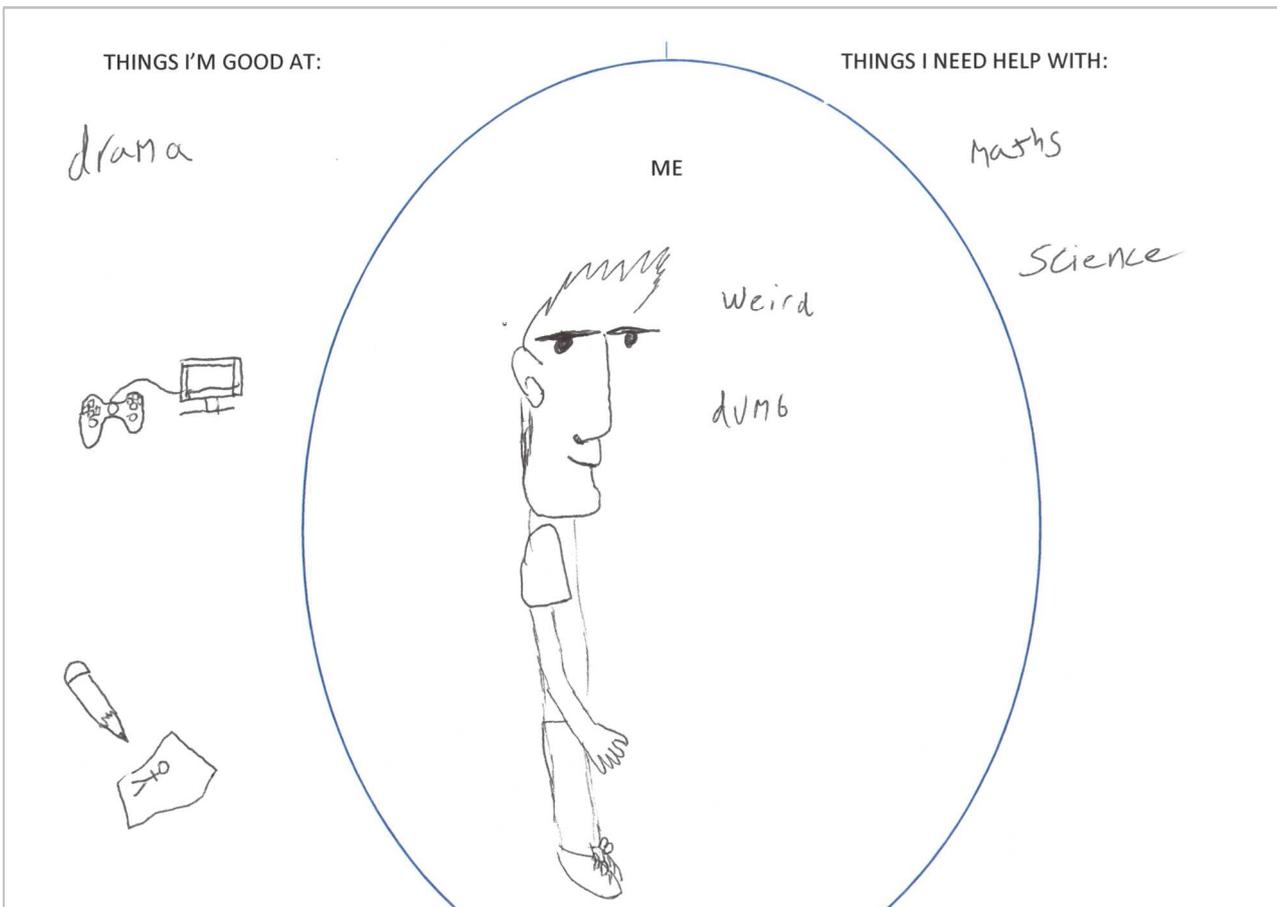

Figure 2 - A self portrait of a SEND pupil in a mainstream school.

categories of disability humour identified by Burbach & Babbit (1993). A statement like "I know I'm annoying" suggests pride at being annoying, it is what they and other people notice about themselves.

Other SEND pupils focused on things they enjoyed, particularly things they thought they excelled at (see below). They discussed their creative, artistic or athletic skills, while a minority mentioned one or more academic subjects that they thought they were good at.

Some of the ways participants described themselves:

A bit weird, not very clever

I know I'm annoying, you don't have to say.

I'm unique in any way possible and if I put my mind to it, I will achieve what I wish.

I'm good at being lazy, playing games. I'm good at being happy

I'm quite creative and have a bit of imagination with it all.

I'm a good goal keeper and I'm good at English

I'm quite musical, and I like acting

I'm good at science, PE, drama, art, music and technology

I also have scuba diving qualifications

The emphasis for most SEND pupils in mainstream schools was on positives – the activities and interests they enjoyed and that they were good at. Disability was almost never mentioned as something that made them stand out from their peers. This reflected Priestley's (1998) argument that other demographic factors are more important than disability for disabled children in an accessible environment with sufficient support.

Participants also did not discuss their gender, ethnicity, age, sexuality, etc, suggesting that for SEND pupils disability, like other demographic characteristics, is immutable and therefore not worth discussing. For example, previous research in Spain (Sedano, 2012) and the UK (Iqbal, Neal, & Vincent, 2017) found that while children were capable of recognising others as having the same or different racial background to themselves, this was not given the same importance as shared interests when selecting social groups.

As discussed above (see on page 10), some young people with SEND do not consider their disability particularly important, and so when meeting a stranger – even one who has explicitly come to their school to ask them about disability – they prefer to talk about other aspects of their life. Education policy makers and practitioners should aim at naturalising and normalising support and accommodation for pupils with SEND, both for those pupils and for pupils without SEND.

While disabled pupils may not think their disability to be particularly important when selecting social groups, the experience of social inclusion and bullying at school found in our research and in the wider literature (see page 17) indicates that their non-disabled peers may be influenced by disability when selecting social groups.

SEND pupils in special schools

Like their counterparts in mainstream schools (see page 10), SEND pupils in special schools defined themselves largely on the basis of personality traits and their particular interests. Compared to their counterparts in mainstream schools, few SEND pupils in special schools had particularly negative views of their own personality, although several did refer to themselves as lazy:

Lazy… I can sleep all day if I want to

SEND pupil in special school

In contrast to SEND pupils in mainstream schools, pupils in special schools were more likely to place emphasis on their kindness, how they like to help others, and how being helpful and supportive to their peers was a core part of their sense of self. Even potentially disruptive behaviour such as joking around in class was presented by participants as a positive contribution that other people could enjoy:

I always joke around and make everybody laugh

SEND pupil in special school

The reason for the greater centrality of being helpful and kind to the self-perception of pupils in special schools is unclear. It could be the result of the differing curriculum in special schools, where pupil's greater support needs often mean an emphasis on social interaction and other soft skills, in place of more traditional academic or vocational subjects (Imray & Hinchcliffe, 2012; Lacey & Scull, 2015). It could also be the result of the way special schools are organised, with pupils spending all day together in small classes instead of going to different classes with different peers (Lacey & Scull, 2015). In that situation, being friendly, helpful and likeable is particularly important; if your peers in one class do not like you that is much less of an issue than if you spend all day at school in a class with people you do not get on with.

Basically, I'm funny, kind and helpful.

I like helping people calm down, keep calm

So basically, if somebody else got into their own predicament I would kindly help them

SEND pupils in special school
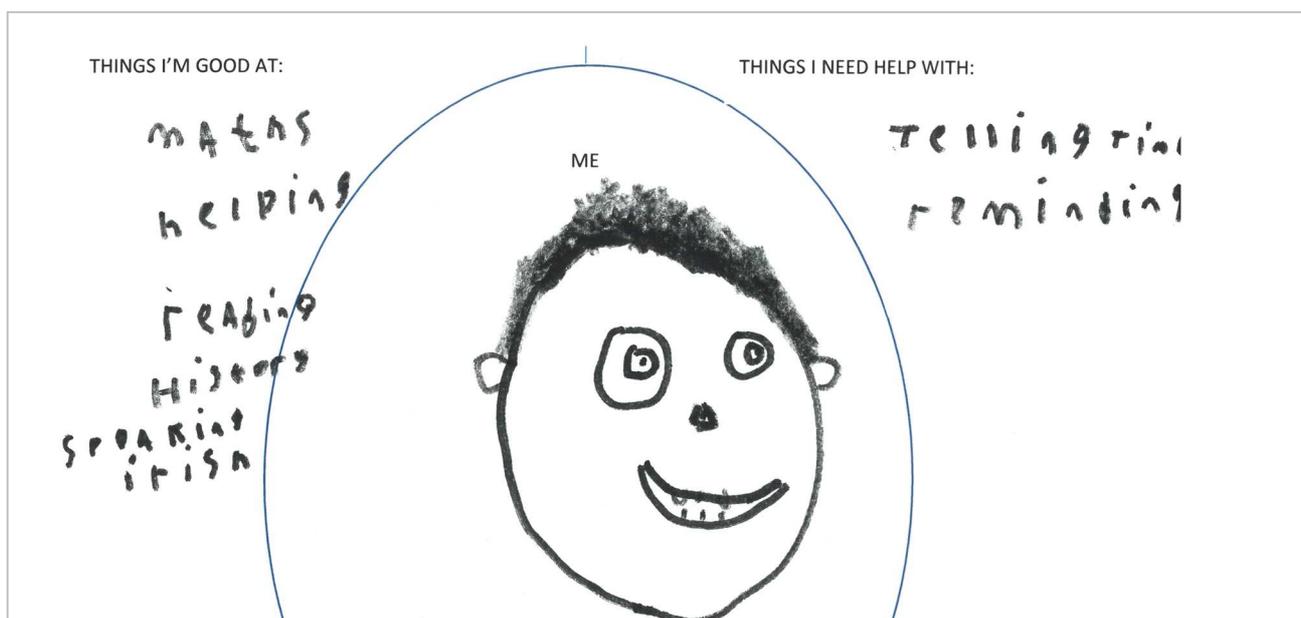
Figure 3 – A self portrait of a SEND pupil in a special school.

Whilst not generalisable, these findings highlight the potentially important role school environments play in shaping young people's identities and sense of self, a topic of increasing consideration for researchers and policymakers (Kaplan & Flum, 2012). They also indicate some differences in how different pedagogical approaches can influence what young people see as important traits to cultivate in themselves.

SEND pupils in special schools were distinctive from SEND pupils in mainstream schools, as well as non-SEND pupils, in their greater emphasis on helping others, being calm and being kind, as central to their identity. The distinction between SEND pupils in special schools and all pupils in mainstream schools in this report is generally much greater than that between SEND and non-SEND pupils in mainstream schools. This may in part be because SEND pupils in special schools tend to have higher support needs than those in mainstream schools,[1] but practitioners, families and young disabled people themselves should be sensitive to the impact – both positive and negative – of different school settings on identity formation when making decisions.

SEND pupils in special schools did not describe themselves through references to academic subjects (only raising subjects they liked or disliked when asked about things they liked or disliked at school), while at some pupils in mainstream schools described themselves by referencing subjects they felt they were strong in.

Non-SEND pupils

Some non-SEND pupils also described themselves as "weird" or "strange", using similar terms to some of their peers with SEND. They described themselves as such with confidence, as a matter of pride. The self-assuredness that some non-SEND pupils expressed in their "weirdness" can be contrasted with those SEND pupils in mainstream schools who used similar language to describe themselves, but did so with more self-deprecating or ironic humour, rather than a point of pride.
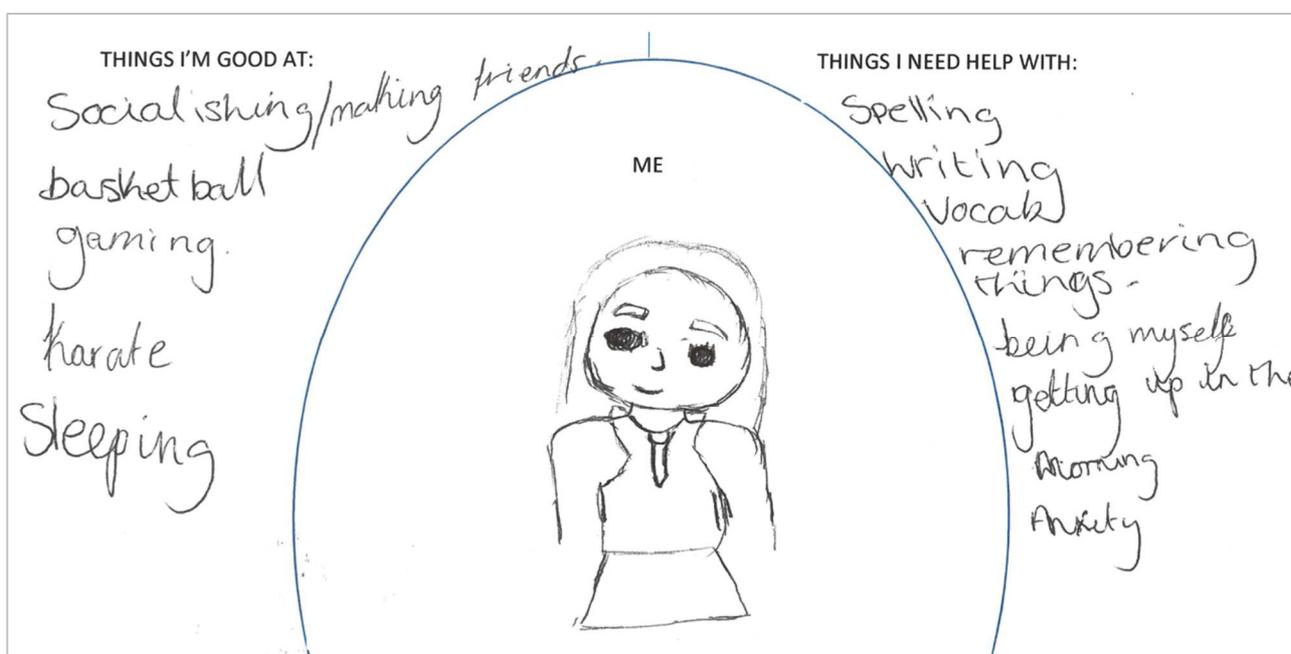

Figure 4 - A self portrait of a non-SEND pupil in a mainstream school.

[1] EHCPs and SEND statements indicate higher support needs than pupils receiving SEND support without a statement or EHCP. 98% of pupils in special schools in England in 2017-18 had an EHCP or statement, compared to 11% of pupils with SEND in mainstream schools (Department for Education, 2018).

> *I'm strange*
>
> *I'm weird*
>
> *I'm the complainer of the group, the drama queen and complainer.*
>
> Non-SEND pupils in mainstream school

SEND and non-SEND pupils in mainstream schools were otherwise similar in how they talked about themselves, tending to emphasise their personalities and non-academic interests over school subjects they excelled in. Policy and practice guidance for SEND pupils emphasises the differences between SEND and non-SEND pupils, but there were far more similarities than differences between the self-descriptions of SEND and non-SEND pupils. Likewise, SEND pupils in both special and mainstream schools described themselves in a wide variety of ways, while in policy they are often treated as a homogenous group.

3.2   HOW – IF AT ALL – DO THEY FEEL THEIR IMPAIRMENT AFFECTS THEIR LIFE?

SEND pupils in mainstream schools

Not every SEND pupil described their impairment as having either a positive or negative impact on their life. Pupils with SEND who did describe the impact of their impairment did so in one of two ways:

- either through discussing the support they received in class and other reasonable adjustments at school, and/or
- through bullying, which in some cases was linked to their impairment.

Pupils with SEND who received extra help were able to describe that help, but tended to be unclear about *why* they received it. They rarely linked it to specific impairments or needs, and were sometimes self-deprecating in their explanations for why they received support, describing themselves as getting help from teaching assistants because they are lazy:

> *Like, I only have like a couple more times tables to learn because I'm too lazy to learn them, so I get TAs to help me.*
>
> SEND pupil in mainstream school

Pupils with SEND stating they get assistance from a TA because of laziness is possible a cause for concern. It may be a kind of ironic humour (see page 12 for a discussion of this type of humour), or the result of feeling uncomfortable talking about support needs and the reasons for them, particularly in front of their peers and/or to someone they haven't met before, but pupils with SEND may be genuinely unaware why they receive extra assistance that most of their classmates do not. This is in line with recent research in England found that majority of young people with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) interviewed were unaware that they had a support plan, and if they did know they had an EHCP were often unaware of its contents (Franklin, Brady, & Durell, 2018, p. 14). This could leave pupils unable to advocate for themselves, knowing what kind of assistance they need if they transfer schools or progress to college or university, and make it difficult to set up reasonable adjustments at work in the future.

> *Well I used to get help in maths, which was good. I don't really anymore, but, cause I can't see very well they do allow me to leave for lunch five minutes early and get the bus home from school five minutes early which is helpful. And also if say I did need some help in a subject I could just ask them which is good.*
>
> SEND pupil in mainstream school

In the quote above, the pupil links a reasonable adjustment – leaving class five

minutes early – with their particularly disability. They did not elaborate on why they no longer receive help in maths, although they were, like most SEND pupils in mainstream schools, aware of who they could ask if they needed extra help in class. However the disconnect between their disability and reasonable adjustments described by many SEND pupils suggests that they might have difficulty identifying what they could get help for, or what help is even possible. Supporting pupils with SEND to better understand their disability and the reasonable adjustments and support they can access could lead to better academic outcomes and better prepare them for life with their disability. This could take many forms, depending on each pupil's needs, but helping pupils to understand their disability at a young age will have a positive impact in both the short and long terms.

SEND pupils in special schools

SEND pupils in special schools did not understand the idea of getting "extra" help or support in class. As special schools group pupils by age, ability and support needs, receiving TA assistance or using special equipment doesn't stand out when everyone in the class receives something similar.

Some SEND pupils in special schools were aware of their impairment insofar as it affected their ability to walk, but otherwise they did not discuss explicitly or implicitly the impact of their impairment on day-to-day activities or their life more generally. Like some of their peers with SEND in mainstream schools, many SEND pupils in special schools may not have been aware of the exact nature of their disability.

> *We're disabled because we can't walk.*
>
> SEND pupil in special school

Other SEND pupils in special schools did not think of themselves as disabled because they *could* walk. Reflecting Priestley et al's. (1999) findings, SEND pupils in special schools tended to define disability by the use of assistance aids such as wheelchairs or communication devices. As the wheelchair symbol is in widespread use as a universal marker of disability it is unsurprising that young people with SEND, as well as young people without SEND, would gravitate to wheelchairs as the key indicator of whether or not a person was disabled. This may also reflect the lack of information that young people with SEND are given about their own disability.

3.3 HOW DO DISABLED CHILDREN FEEL THEY ARE TREATED IN SCHOOL?

SEND pupils in mainstream schools

SEND pupils in mainstream schools were more likely than their non-SEND peers to describe themselves as having a small social group at school, reflecting research that found that SEND pupils in mainstream schools had smaller social networks than their non-SEND classmates (Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl, & Petry, 2013; Henke et al., 2017).

Different young may have different conceptions of what constitutes a friend, and some pupils may conceive of having no friends, of being deliberately alone and aloof, as their preferred identity, perhaps as one of the "loners" described by Sula Wolff (1995).

Others may have been excluded from their peers social networks (see the discussion on bullying and social exclusion starting on page 18).

> *[I have a] small group of friends.*
>
> *[T]he [one] friend that I have now I've been friends with him since Year R, so if I was like to move school or anything like that, I'd probably not have friends*
>
> SEND pupils in mainstream school

Many pupils, both with and without SEND, discussed the various social groups in their school, and understood where their particular

social group stood within the school. No SEND pupil described themselves as belonging to one of the most popular social groups in their school, but tended to be proud of belonging to their particular social group. Pupils with SEND in mainstream schools appeared to be, while not entirely without a social group, largely with fellow social outcasts, who may or may not have SEND.

> *I wouldn't exactly put it as like my group of friends would be like nerds, but just like we're not the most popular group, like we just kind of stand out. We're like weird but like in a nice way… Like we're quirky I guess, you could say that.*
>
> SEND pupil in mainstream school

Bullying

SEND pupils in mainstream schools discussed bullying and described:

- Experiencing bullying themselves
- Seeing their peers being bullied

This theme also emerged in discussions with non-SEND pupils (see page 20). However, proportionately more SEND pupils in mainstream schools discussed being bullied than non-SEND pupils, and did so in more detail. While their non-SEND peers simply stated that they had been bullied, SEND pupils in mainstream schools would spontaneously describe specific incidents or forms of bullying they had experienced:

> *Like I'll walk into a class and I'm met with horrible comments because I walk differently because I have mobility… I walk with my feet turned out and I'm met with "penguin" or "retard", stuff like that*
>
> SEND pupil in mainstream school

Our findings correspond with previous research that found pupils with SEND are more likely to report being bullied than their non-SEND peers.

For example, research by Chatzitheochari, Parsons, & Platt, (2016) found that SEND children in the Millennium Cohort Study were significantly more likely to be frequent victims of bullying, defined as answering "all of the time" to the question "how often do other children bully you?", compared to non-SEND children after controlling for other known risk factors. Bullying can have complex causes, but SEND pupils in mainstream schools described being targeted because of their disability, and with verbal abuse and taunts, as well as physical assaults.

SEND pupils described being bullied and harassed over reasonable adjustments by classmates who did not understand why they were able to leave class five minutes early.

> *But there is a group of girls who always do the same thing. Who think it's quite unfair that I get to leave early, and yesterday they actually had an argument with me, and in the end the teacher had to stop them because they were saying "it's not fair why does she get to leave early", and they just don't really understand*
>
> SEND pupil in mainstream school

Explaining what reasonable adjustments are and why pupils with SEND get them could curtail this form of bullying, but it could also require pupils with SEND to reveal more about their impairments to their classmates than they otherwise would, effectively trading away privacy and control over personal information in exchange for messages that may or may not get through to their peers (for more on the tension between privacy and adjustment see page 11).

> *Other schools will say, "We have no bullying," and then you get bullied and you're like, "Well, I thought there was no bullying."*
>
> SEND pupil in mainstream school

In the quote above, the pupil stressed that they were not talking about their present school, but argued that existing anti-bullying measures in many schools were ineffective and that teachers and school leaders did not grasp the extent of bullying in their school. Pupils seemed sceptical of teacher-led approaches to reduce bullying and social exclusion.

Bullying as described above consists of being consistently targeted by one's peers, but SEND pupils also described being more generally excluded by their peers, which can be both the cause and effect of bullying (Faris & Felmlee, 2014). Some SEND pupils in mainstream schools suggested that they were treated well in class, but were excluded from the wider social life of their school, and ignored socially ignored by most of their year group.

> *Most of the sporty people in my year are distasteful… just generally they're not as kind as some other people.*
>
> SEND pupil in mainstream school

The reactions of SEND pupils to being bullied was varied. Some pupils appeared deflated and depressed while talking about being bullied, others were more sanguine.

> *…it's really not nice but I can cope with what they're saying and what I say in my head is always, "It's not true, I can do this, I'll just push through," and if necessary, if it gets too much, I can go straight to NT and relax*
>
> SEND pupil in mainstream school

The personal encouragement this pupil reported appeared to be a self-developed coping mechanism, or was at least presented by the pupil as something they do themselves, by themselves. Of course, encouraging and supporting effective personal coping mechanisms for pupils with SEND does not eliminate the problem of bullying, but supporting the coping skills of pupils with SEND

does not preclude other anti-bullying initiatives.

The comments from pupils with SEND in mainstream schools suggest schools should pay closer attention to bullying involving pupils with SEND than many seem to do currently. In some cases, teachers may be aware of bullying going on in the school, or the systematic nature in which some SEND pupils reported being targeted, but are not sure how to adequately respond. Pupils with SEND in mainstream schools expressed frustration at the lack of response from schools to bullying, and hinted at a culture of bullying denialism in the management of some schools, and regarded anti-bullying initiatives as insufficient and unhelpful. Existing guidance on bullying such as the "Preventing and tackling bullying" framework (Department for Education, 2017) discusses how pupils with SEND are at higher risk of bullying, but do not suggest SEND-specific initiatives or approaches to tackling bullying.

SEND pupils in special schools

Bullying and social exclusion was not limited to mainstream schools. Some pupils in special schools described being bullied or socially excluded by their peers. They did not label their experience as bullying as such, instead referring to consistent exclusion or maltreatment from their peers. For instance, one pupil explained:

> *Some people treat me not so nice sometimes.*
>
> SEND pupil in special school

Discussion of bullying or social exclusion among SEND pupils in special schools was unusual, and it did not come up in every focus group in special schools. The reasons for this are unclear. We did not specifically ask about bullying, but instead about how they were treated in school, which many pupils interpreted as treatment by teachers and staff, rather than their peers. Pupils with SEND in special schools also made more indirect

references to bullying or mistreatment in their school, such as one pupil who described the "bad things" at their school as "fighting, beating [people] up, mud", but did not elaborate on that description.

Norwich & Kelly (2004) compared the experiences of young people with learning disabilities attending special schools with similarly disabled peers at mainstream schools. They found young people attending special schools were much more likely to report being bullying outside of school. If this was the case with the young people who spoke to us, they may have thought their in-school social interactions to be more positive than those outside of school.

Nothing in our research suggests that SEND pupils in special schools were less likely to be bullied than their peers in mainstream schools, either in school or outside of school. Rather it appears that the SEND pupils in special schools that we spoke to did not interpret indirect questions about treatment in school as asking specifically about bullying, did not have a way of effectively describing being bullied, or did not feel comfortable talking about it in the focus group.

Figure 5 - Self-portrait – SEND pupil in special school

Non-SEND pupils

A substantial minority of non-SEND pupils (6 of 14) also reported being bullied at some point, or discussed it as a general problem in their school without specifying if they had personally experienced it. Non-SEND pupils provided few details on how they were bullied, compared to how SEND pupils spontaneously provided details about being bullied, including specific events or forms of bullying they had experienced (see Section 0).

> *Like if I'm getting bullied or stuff like that. It's not like nice to come to school and know that there's people there waiting for you.*
>
> Non-SEND pupil in mainstream school

Non-SEND pupils were often aware of their peers with SEND being bullied, and discussed both the general phenomenon of disabled young people being bullied, and specific disabled young people they knew who had been bullied, either at school or elsewhere. As discussed below, this raises the possibility of developing peer support networks to tackle bullying.

Bullying

Some non-SEND pupils reported seeing their disabled classmates being bullied, and being treated differently by both teachers and classmates.

> *They get treated differently.*
>
> *Yeah, they normally get bullied.*
>
> *People don't get how it would be like to be disabled so they bully people who are disabled.*
>
> Non-SEND pupil in mainstream school

Other non-SEND pupils described friends with SEND who were bullied specifically because of their disability and expressed a desire to help.

They were getting bullied at school because of their disability

Non-SEND pupil in mainstream school

Some SEND pupils in mainstream schools discussed their peers not understanding why they received reasonable adjustments (see page 18), or were treated differently by teachers, an issue also discussed by some non-SEND pupils. Non-SEND pupils recognised how receiving reasonable adjustments in class, such as extra support from teachers or teaching assistants singled out their SEND peers. Being seen as different by their peers could make pupils with SEND a target for bullying, or simply result in having a smaller social group.

Some people don't like teachers giving them a lot of attention.

Non-SEND pupil in mainstream school

In one case, a non-SEND pupil described that phenomenon from a different perspective, when asked about if they felt similar to any of their disabled classmates:

Like, I'm quite similar to one girl in quite a few lessons and but then we're very different at the same time. Like, we don't really hang out outside of class but we're, like, good friends inside of class.

Non-SEND pupil in mainstream school

In all of the examples of pupils with SEND being bullied, pupils without SEND expressed disapproval, but also indicated an understanding of the problem of SEND pupils being bullied, and when talking about disabled people many non-SEND pupils raised the issue of bullying unprompted. For example, when asked if they knew any disabled people in their school, one non-SEND pupil replied "'Yeah, they normally get bullied." This raises the possibility of peer-support between pupils with and without SEND to reduce bullying or reduce the impact of bullying. The shared experience of being bullied could allow for common ground between different groups of young people and offer opportunities for creating new social networks within schools, further reducing the risk and impact of bullying.

3.4   HOW WOULD DISABLED CHILDREN LIKE TO BE TREATED IN SCHOOL?

SEND pupils in mainstream schools
Unsurprisingly, and given their school experiences, SEND pupils wanted fewer incidents of bullying and more inclusion. To achieve these outcomes, SEND pupils largely felt that teaching practices and school organisation needed to change. For instance, one SEND pupil explained:

I would make the discipline more strict, people can just get away with anything… make it so then like it's for like everybody and like everybody can like join in and not feel like left out for like any sort of thing

SEND pupil in mainstream school

Rather than seeking to directly change their peers' behaviour, SEND pupils saw teachers and school leaders as the gatekeepers to a more inclusive school experience.

When discussing bullying, pupils rarely assigned blame but expressed more frustration with teachers failing to address bullying than they did with their peers who were bullying them.

This contradicts finding from some existing research on who young people assign responsibility for bullying to, such as two studies in Sweden (Thornberg & Knutsen, 2011; Thornberg, Rosenqvist, & Johansson, 2012) which found that school environment and practice were considered the least important factors by young people. However

other research has found that classroom norms and control can have a significant impact on bullying behaviour (Crothers & Kolbert, 2008; Roland & Galloway, 2002; Sentse, Veenstra, Kiuru, & Salmivalli, 2015), and the Department for Education's guidance on bullying (Department for Education, 2017, p. 10) highlights ethos and culture as effective anti-bullying strategies. Pupils' views that teachers and school leaders are gatekeepers to greater inclusion and less bullying fits with the expectations of young people in previous research who thought that teachers could and should do more to reduce bullying in the classroom (Crothers & Kolbert, 2004; Veenstra, Lindenberg, Huitsing, Sainio, & Salmivalli, 2014). Pupils who had been bullied viewed their school as bearing more responsibility then their actual bullies.

For SEND pupils, it is the school and its practices that can change how they are treated by their peers. This suggests that teachers and policy-makers should place more emphasis on addressing bullying and social exclusion in school, and in managing behaviour in classrooms through setting and enforcing expectations.

SEND pupils in special schools

SEND pupils in special schools did not express views about how they would like to be treated, instead focusing on how they were currently treated, which was largely positive.

Non-SEND pupils in mainstream schools

Like their peers with SEND discussed above, many non-SEND pupils echoed the desire for more classroom control and consistency in behavioural expectations. Some non-SEND pupils recognised that their peers with SEND were particularly likely to be victims of bullying. Like pupils with SEND, they viewed teachers as gatekeepers to inclusion and expressed disappointment with teachers who they thought were not adequately responding to bullying in their classroom.

> *Lots of the time teachers just turn a blind eye to this and if they didn't I think it would change the way people thought of them [disabled people] a lot*
>
> Non-SEND pupil in mainstream school

The young people in mainstream schools that spoke to us, both with and without SEND, expected teachers to do more to intervene against bullying, and do more to promote inclusive, friendly learning environments.

4 What attitudes do disabled children hold about other disabled children?

SUMMARY BOX

- Pupils with SEND that we spoke to identified disabled people in their school or outside of school

- None of the pupils described disability in a way that strongly reflected the "social model" of disability, although some recognised there were things that would make disabled people's lives easier

- The pupils with SEND we spoke to did not see themselves as particularly similar to disabled people, either conceptually or to specific disabled people they knew

Every mainstream school that we held a focus group at reported more than 10% of their students received SEND support or had an EHCP, and all but one mainstream school had proportions of students with SEND above the national average for mainstream secondary schools, according to the 2018 "Special educational needs in England" set of statistics (Department for Education, 2018). Despite this, a substantial minority of both SEND and non-SEND pupils stated they did not know any disabled people who went to their school.

This is not surprising. Many pupils had a relatively narrow definition of what a disability is or who is disabled. For example, while pupils would automatically recognise the association between mobility difficulties, particularly people using wheelchairs, and disability, they would not necessarily do the same for other kinds of disabilities, even if they discussed them. One pupil in a special school, when asked what they thought of disability, simply replied "wheelchairs". This could in part be a function of the kinds of disabilities and SEND needs their peers have – in most of the schools sampled only a handful of pupils had a mobility difficulty as their primary reason for SEND. It also reflects the use of wheelchairs as a catch-all symbol for disability and disabled people. This held across all the focus groups, even those in special schools. In one focus

group in a special school, discussion of someone in their school "that can walk but he's still in a wheelchair" was a difficult edge case, and pupils were unsure if this person was or was not disabled.

Definitions varied, but there was a strong link between wheelchairs and disability, and pupils didn't use terms or definitions that were reflective of the social model of disability. Pupils viewed disability as a person-centric problem, rather than a social one, and all groups of pupils discussed disability by focusing on specific impairments or types of impairments. They emphasised the activities a disabled person could not do, rather than external barriers preventing the disabled person from doing something. A pupil in a special school described as peer as "he can't talk, he can't walk", while according to a SEND pupil in a mainstream school disabled people "can't do half of the things we do".

Few SEND pupils, both in special and in mainstream schools, actively identified themselves as disabled, even when their descriptions of a disabled person aligned closely with their descriptions of themselves, or they described themselves as feeling similar to disabled people. In some cases, SEND pupils would initially describe themselves as feeling similar to a disabled person they know or to

disabled people more generally, but then assert their difference.

The majority of SEND pupils had invisible or semi-visible disabilities,[2] which may explain their reluctance to identify with disabled people, or to identify themselves as disabled. Given the stigma surrounding disability (as evidenced in the school environment by SEND pupils' smaller social networks and greater risk of being bullied) it is perfectly reasonable for young people with disabilities to not identify as such. SEND pupils came across as hesitant to be open about the specifics of their disability with their peers. They may be unsure of how to talk about their disability, or feel shame about it; regardless of the root cause schools can do more to support openness about SEND, such as encouraging teachers and staff with invisible disabilities to talk about them with pupils, and tackling the social exclusion that likely contributes to SEND pupil's reluctance to be open, even in front of each other.

INFORMATION BOX: Models of Disability

Since the early 1980s, disabled activists and academics have developed and debated different conceptual models of disability. All models of disability are ideal types which emphasise different aspects of the "problem" of disability. In the UK disability sector, the two most important are the "social model" and the "medical model".

The medical model of disability views the problem of disability as the result of specific impairments or health conditions, and emphasises medical intervention, prevention and rehabilitation as the most effective method to improve the lives of disabled people.

The social model of disability, by contrast, treats disability as a social phenomenon that imposes limitations above and beyond the impact of a disabled person's impairment or health condition. It prioritises the removal of external barriers – physical, legal and attitudinal – over medical treatment, as the best way to improve the lives of disabled people. The social model of disability has been and continues to be important to disability rights movements around the world, and is particularly influential in Britain, where most of the early theoretical discussion of the social model of disability took place. For a discussion of these and other lesser-used models of disability, see Shakespeare (2014, pp. 11–110).

4.1 HOW DO THEY VIEW OTHER DISABLED CHILDREN WITH SIMILAR DISABILITIES?

SEND pupils in mainstream schools

SEND pupils in mainstream schools were able to identify other young people with disabilities but were often hesitant to identify with them, going so far as to discuss how they felt similar to another disabled young person, only to retreat and assert their difference. It was often unclear if the other disabled people they were referring to had similar disabilities to them.

> *I don't think I'm that much different. Normally when I chat to them it's quite nice and fun, but I guess, no, I think I'm different*
>
> SEND pupil in mainstream school

---

[2] Invisible disabilities includes chronic illnesses, mental health issues, autism and some learning disabilities, where the disability is not readily apparent to other people. Semi-visible disabilities include some hearing/visual impairments, mobility issues and learning disabilities where people are able to hide their disability in certain situations.

The reluctance of most SEND pupils to identify with their disabled peers, either on the basis of similar disabilities or shared experiences, suggests an internalised stigma about being labelled "disabled". As discussed in Section 3.1, SEND pupils in mainstream schools rarely described themselves as disabled and discussed their impairment indirectly if at all. Most SEND pupils in mainstream schools did not refer to or compare themselves to other young people (or adults) with similar disabilities to themselves.

Not all SEND pupils in mainstream schools distanced themselves from disabled people. One pupil who reported having an unspecified health condition described their experience of meeting people with the same or similar condition as "almost as if I was looking at my own reflection in a way". However this was unusual, and this pupil did not expand on the reasons why they thought this.

SEND pupils in special schools

In special schools, SEND pupils did not identify others as having similar disabilities to them, at least in part because of how they did not identify themselves as disabled. However, SEND pupils in special schools spoke to each other more during focus groups than SEND pupils in mainstream schools and non-SEND schools, perhaps indicative of a shared experience and understanding that they did not articulate, or because of the smaller class and school sizes in mainstream schools.

4.2 HOW DO THEY VIEW CHILDREN WITH DIFFERENT DISABILITIES FROM THEM?

SEND pupils in mainstream schools

Most pupils with SEND in mainstream schools distinguished themselves from others with disabilities, regardless of their own disability or others that they were aware of. Many strongly equated having a disability with being unable to walk, and because they could walk, did not think of themselves as having very much in common with other disabled young people:

> *A bit like different because we can walk and they can't, so I feel sorry for them.*
>
> SEND pupil in mainstream school

Others discussed what they typically called "mental disability", which they appeared to use to refer to learning disabilities. They viewed themselves as being very different from people they described using this term:

> *Mentally disabled people, like people that need, like, need help with like their brain or something like that, that's what it means.*
>
> SEND pupil in mainstream school

There were some exceptions where pupils with SEND in mainstream schools did describe themselves as similar, at least in some things, to disabled people they knew. One SEND pupil with a self-described visual impairment compared their experience to that of a friend with diabetes. They described travel as being something that would be inherently difficult for them, due to their difficulties seeing, whereas they considered a long-term health condition like diabetes to be relatively manageable.

> *I think I am quite different… because he wouldn't have too much limits in his way, but with me I would have quite a few things, like I can't strain my eyes too much or I can't, I'm even scared of getting off a train or have like weird fears of like planes or something. So I think that I'm quite different because I'm a bit more severe and have more things that are in my way than he does*
>
> SEND pupil in mainstream school

This explicit discussion of personal experience of impairment was, however, unusual.

One of the few SEND pupils to actively identify themselves as disabled because of their hearing impairment believed that it made less of a difference in their life than a mental disability:

> *I mean I am disabled, I'm physically disabled because my ears don't work as well, mild to moderate hearing loss in both ears, but it hasn't affected me as much as I think a mental disability would.*
>
> SEND pupil in mainstream school

Many SEND pupils in mainstream schools expressed frustration with their peers who disrupted lessons, and were critical of teachers who didn't control the behaviour in their class. While it is unclear why those pupils were disruptive in class, previous research has consistently found that pupils have more negative views about peers with emotional and behavioural disabilities (de Boer, Pijl, Post, & Minnaert, 2012; Hoza et al., 2005; Koster, Pijl, Nakken, & Van Houten, 2010). If this disruption is due to emotional or behavioural disabilities, it suggests that there is little sense of cross-disability solidarity or understanding.

Other SEND pupils in mainstream schools appeared to understand a continuity between disabled and non-disabled people, expressing the view that "disability just means like you need help", but also recognising that everyone needs help with some things at least some of the time. For these pupils, disabled and non-disabled were not discrete categories, and while most did not think of themselves as disabled, they were able to recognise the varieties of human experience disability.

There ultimately was no consistent, cross-cutting view of disabled people as a whole among SEND pupils in mainstream schools.

SEND pupils in special schools

SEND pupils in special schools, like SEND pupils in mainstream schools, strongly linked disability and walking, and described being different from disabled people because they could walk.

> *I don't know, I haven't seen anyone else with disabilities. All the people around me seems pretty able to just run and jump evenly. The only person I know with disabilities [are] Sarah and Alex[3] and that's the only two I know so far.*
>
> SEND pupil in special school

In one case, pupils discussed a classmate of theirs who uses eye-controlled computers for at least some tasks. Despite the use of assistive technology associated with the most severe physical disabilities, this classmate was not mentioned earlier in the focus group when pupils were asked if they knew any disabled people at school. This suggests that pupils had not given much thought to the idea of disability, and some pupils with SEND in special schools were not sure what the word disability meant. Pupils asked questions like "is being gullible a disability?", in an attempt to clarify what is and is not a disability.

> *Everyone's different in their life, like everyone's different, everyone likes different things, everyone's good at different things, everyone's good at something you're really not good at. Things like that.*
>
> SEND pupil in special school

Some SEND pupils in special schools expressed views suggesting that they did not see a clear distinction between disabled and non-disabled people, such as in the quote above. The recognition of disability as a continuum or a spectrum seemed stronger in special schools

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[3] Names have been changed

than in mainstream schools. However, this recognition existed alongside apparently lower clarity about what society views as a disability, and what it means to have a disability.

Pupils in special schools who described feeling similar to disabled people with different disabilities from them struggled to articulate why they felt similar. "Because I just do", or variations thereof, was a common answer. It was unclear if these feelings of similarity were based on having had similar experiences because of their disabilities, even if the disabilities themselves were very different, or the result of shared interests.

5 What attitudes do non-disabled pupils hold about their disabled classmates/disabled people/ disability in general?

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">SUMMARY BOX</td></tr>
<tr><td>•</td><td>The pupils without SEND we spoke to described different concepts of disability, but some struggled to identify disabled people they knew in school or outside of school</td></tr>
<tr><td>•</td><td>Like their peers with SEND, pupils without SEND who spoke to us equated disability with being unable to walk or do particular tasks or activities, emphasising functional limitations</td></tr>
<tr><td>•</td><td>Pupils without SEND who could identify disabled people in their lives described holding positive or neutral views of them, describing a person's disability as a fact of functional limitation rather than moral judgement or disgust</td></tr>
<tr><td>•</td><td>The pupils without SEND who discussed their relationship with their disabled peers described themselves as friendly, but not friends, with disabled people school in their school</td></tr>
</table>

5.1 WHAT DO NON-DISABLED CHILDREN THINK ABOUT THEIR DISABLED PEERS?

Non-SEND pupils

Pupils without SEND were able to describe a concept of disability, typically people who could not walk and so used wheelchairs. However not all pupils without SEND were able to identify disabled people that they knew inside or outside of school, despite all being in schools where at least 10% of the student body were pupils with SEND. This may be due to a lack of awareness of what is a disability, or from pupils with SEND not being open with many of their peers.

Judgement about disability and disabled people, such as pity, was unusual. Pupils without SEND had an image of what a disabled person is, or could identify specific disabled people they knew, but treated it as an empirical fact rather than a question of moral judgement, or a source of fear or disgust. They focused on the activities or tasks that someone with a disability could not do, rather than any external barriers they might face. They viewed disability as a functional difference, rather than a social one.

> *I feel sorry for them because things that I'm able to they're not able to do, so like I'm able to play football but Aiden's not able to play football because of how he runs and he just can't focus.*
>
> *I think disabled means that people can't do things as well as we can.*
>
> Non-SEND pupils in mainstream school

Several non-SEND pupils expressed frustration with the process for deciding who did or did not get extra support or help in school. They believed that resources were directed to pupils with obvious disabilities or who could be disruptive in class, at the expense of other pupils who could benefit from support or adjustment. They did not explicitly associate the need for support with disability, but viewed needing support with "little things" as differences in individual strengths and weaknesses.

Erm, yeah, some people don't like help but I feel like some people who have like dyslexia or stuff, because I have dyslexia and like they don't get a lot of help for it. So they just help you if you've got something that stands out.

Yeah, like anger issues and stuff, people can tell if you've got anger issues like if you get angry a lot, but like people don't help you if you just have little things like you can't read very well or something or you can't speak.

– Non-SEND pupils in mainstream school

This frustration could be the result of disability support being tied to particular labels or diagnoses; pupils without SEND could recognise that they had difficulties with the same activities and tasks as a classmate with SEND, but did not receive extra help or support because of how they were labelled. Their frustration may also speak to what some of their peers with SEND recognised, that disability is a continuum of experience.

Like some of their peers with SEND, pupils without SEND sometimes described disability as merely difference, as opposed to being better or worse at a particular thing.

It's just somebody who might have a different mindset to you, might just, like, struggle with things that you're good at but, like, but then they'll excel in something you're not that great at.

Non-SEND pupil in mainstream school

Surprisingly, more pupils without SEND mentioned mental health as a form of disability than those with SEND. Some were unsure what qualified as a disability, querying if specific learning difficulties like Dyslexia were disabilities.

Pupils without SEND were largely positive in their views of peers with SEND, with no one expressing hostility towards disability or disabled people. However young people are likely aware, like their parents (de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2010), that expressing positive views about disabled people is the socially acceptable thing to do. The young people we
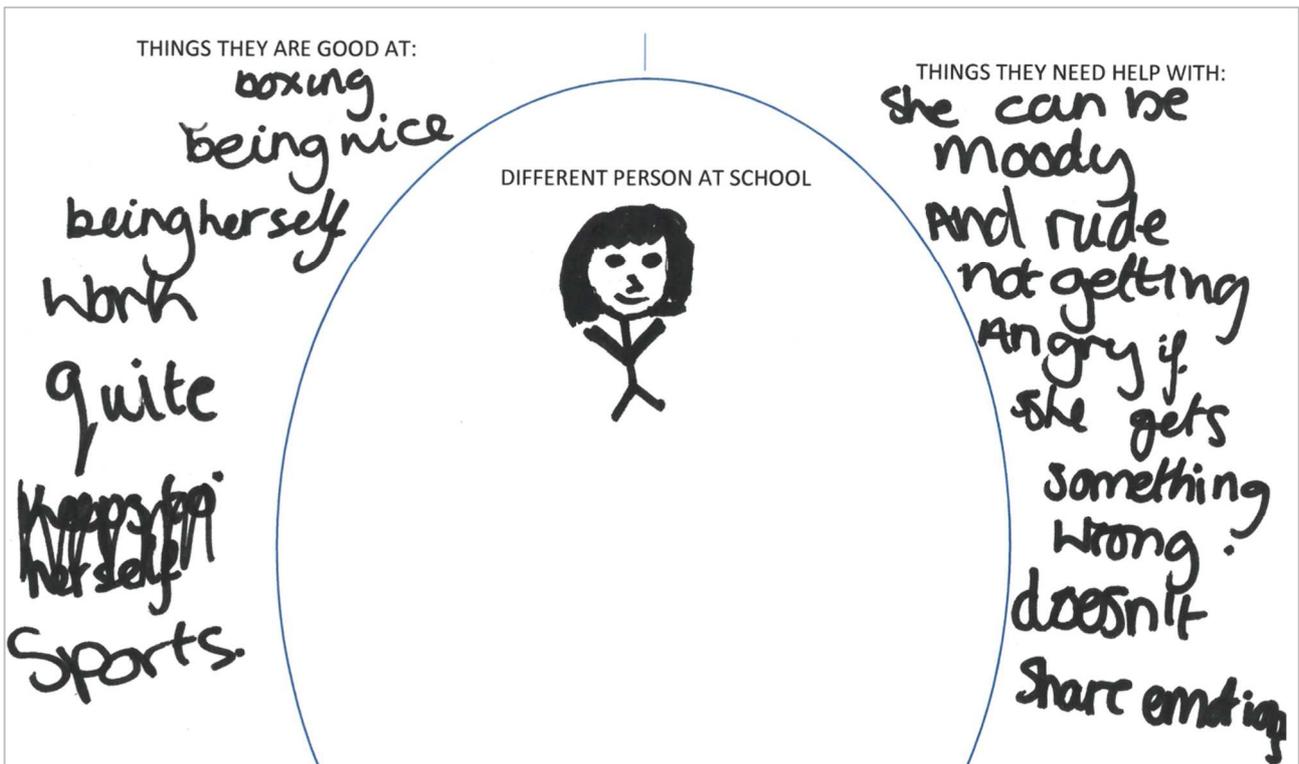

Figure 6 - A portrait of a schoolmate by a non-SEND pupil in a mainstream school

spoke to (including many of those with SEND) also expressed a limited understanding of what disability is and who is disabled. The disabled peers they described were not close friends, and the disabled people they knew outside of school were mostly casual acquaintances or distant relatives, rather than close friends or members of their immediate

family. Therefore, their positive views about disabled people were largely in abstract, and we do not know the extent to which they apply those attitudes to real life situations. Pupils were also selected by their school, and schools may have sought out pupils who they thought would give answers that would reflect well on the school.

5.2 HOW DO NON-DISABLED CHILDREN FEEL THEY TYPICALLY TREAT AND SOCIALISE WITH THEIR DISABLED PEERS?

Non-SEND pupils

Pupils without SEND described themselves as friendly to their peers with SEND, but not friends with them. Pupils without SEND would work with disabled peers in class, but not socialise with them outside of class, and often thought of them as a distinctive other.

> *Like, I'm quite similar to one girl in quite a few lessons and but then we're very different at the same time. Like, we don't really hang out outside of class but we're, like, good friends inside of class.*
>
> Non-SEND pupil in mainstream school

As discussed in Section 3.3, pupils without SEND recognised that their peers with disabilities were often subject to bullying or other forms of mistreatment, although no one admitted to taking part in that mistreatment.

> *In my old primary school there used to be a girl who was actually disabled, but the thing is people always used to be mean to her but then she moved away and came back and they were still mean to her, so she moved away again.*
>
> Non-SEND pupil in mainstream school

Some pupils without SEND struggled to identify peers with disabilities, and while confident that being in a wheelchair meant a person was disabled, were often less confident about identifying other types of disabilities. This suggests both a lack of awareness about what disability is and looks like, aside from common stereotypes, and a lack of openness by pupils with SEND about their special educational needs with their classmates and peers.

Pupils without SEND did not describe peers with disabilities as close friends, but rather as a "person I know who's in some of my classes"; they "see her around school", but never hang out with them. Despite widespread recognition of disabled peers being bullied, no pupil without SEND describing stepping in or reporting instances of bullying to teachers. Pupils without SEND depicted themselves as friendly towards disabled pupils, but not necessarily friends with them.

6 Conclusion

Young people with SEND do not appear to be open about their diagnoses, disabilities or support needs with most of their peers, particularly those without SEND. When we asked young people what makes them stand out from their peers, no one with SEND, even those with visible disabilities, was open about their disability. For some it may be because they did not think their disability or health condition particularly noteworthy, for others stigma and shame may have kept them silent about their disability.

Young people's experiences of disability in school fall short of the mark.

Young people's experiences of disability in school fall short of the mark. Young people with SEND were often unaware of why they receive particular supports or reasonable adjustments, and sometimes appeared unaware of their own disability.

In mainstream schools, pupils with and without SEND were aware that disabled people were more likely to be bullied or socially victimised in school, with many SEND pupils describing how they were mistreated by their peers. Descriptions of bullying in special schools were more unusual, but were reported by some pupils. In both mainstream and special schools pupils with and without SEND expressed disappointment in teachers and school leaders failing to deal with bullying and promote inclusive classroom environments

The pupils without SEND we spoke to expressed largely positive views of disability and disabled people, but viewed disabled people in their school as separate and distinct. Their disabled peers were classmates, but not friends, and pupils with SEND in mainstream schools described having smaller friendship groups than their peers without SEND.

Disabled young people in mainstream schools do not appear to be well integrated into their school's social networks.

It is of vital importance that we work to improve the treatment of disabled young people by their peers.

It is of vital importance that we work to improve the treatment of disabled young people by their peers. Young people with SEND appear to miss out on positive social experiences, particularly with non-disabled young people, leading to both fewer friends and the risk of less developed social skills.

Recent research in Wales indicated that young people with learning disabilities struggle to maintain friendships made at school into adulthood (Butler & Thomas, 2018), and having few positive social experiences at school is likely to have a negative impact on future friendship formation.

More attention must be paid to social experience of pupils with SEND.

Schools, SENCOs and teachers have, understandably, prioritised reasonable adjustments and classroom support for pupils with SEND, but more attention must be paid to social experience of pupils with SEND. No pupils with SEND expressed dissatisfaction with the support they received to help their learning.

Dissatisfaction with how at least some teachers handled bullying and social exclusion was nearly universal among pupils both with and without SEND; every pupil who mentioned school responses to bullying was unhappy with the response, viewing it as too-little too-late rather than a meaningful intervention that could have made things easier for them.

6.1   RECOMMENDATIONS

ISSUE	ACTIONS
Bullying and social inclusion	**School leaders should:** Encourage more active interventions by teachers to address bullying and social exclusion in the classroom, and promote inclusive classroom environments. Support pupils, particularly pupils with SEND, with developing personal skills and coping mechanisms to mitigate the emotional effects of bullying. Consider the importance of socialisation and social inclusion when developing support plans for pupils with SEND, and make developing social skills and friendships a learning outcome.
	The Department for Education should: Assign greater importance to socialisation in the development of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and encourage schools to make the social inclusion of disabled pupils more of a priority. The EHCP creation framework proposed by the RIP:STARS project (Franklin et al., 2018) provides a useful starting point to make social inclusion a key indicator of the effectiveness of EHCPs. EHCP guidance should include forming and sustaining friendships as an outcome, young people with EHCPs should be asked about their social group as part of the EHCP process. Recognise the importance of proper teacher interventions to reduce bullying, and develop SEND-specific guidance. This should involving produce guidance on what teachers should do to reduce bullying of pupils with SEND, and involve young people with SEND in the creation of that guidance. Existing guidance such as the "SEND code of practice" (Department for Education, 2015) and "Preventing and tackling bullying" (Department for Education, 2017) mention that pupils with SEND are at higher risk of bullying, but do not provide specific interventions or approaches to tackle bullying of pupils with SEND aside from separate on-site provision for victims of bullying with SEND.

ISSUE	ACTIONS
Young people's awareness of disability	**School leaders should:** Foster greater openness about SEND and disability in the school, including supporting teachers and other staff with invisible disabilities to "come out" as a positive example to pupils with SEND (if those teachers feel comfortable doing so). Involve pupils with SEND in the development of support plans and setting up reasonable adjustments, to ensure that pupils understand why they are getting the support that they are, and to make that support as responsive as possible to pupils' needs and interests. Further incorporate modules on disability and disabled people into their school's Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education curriculum. Disability and disabled people are mentioned in the PSHE Association's *Programme of Study* (PSHE Association, 2017), but only as part of wider discussion of protected characteristics. School leaders should engage with local disabled people's organisations to support the development of disability-specific lessons and activities, and facilitate disabled people working with schools to co-deliver teaching about disability. **The Department for Education should:** Make disability awareness a compulsory part of the PSHE curriculum provided in schools, establishing clear minimum standards of disability awareness for schools to provide to their pupils. The health and wellbeing components of PSHE will be a statutory subject in all schools from September 2020, but this should be expanded to include components on disability. The disability component of the PSHE curriculum should include information on the social model of disability, human rights and discrimination. Department for Education guidance should recommend co-producing lessons on disability and disabled people with a local disabled person's organisation if reasonably possible. Funding should be made available to support schools engaging in educational co-production with local disabled people's organisations. **Disabled person's organisations should:** Engage with schools, multi-academy trusts and local authorities to co-develop PSHE curriculums on disability, and to support schools to deliver or co-deliver the PSHE curriculum covering disability and disabled people. Set-up in-school programmes to mentor pupils with disabilities and provide young disabled people with an adult mentor with a similar disability to help them better understand their disability and help them prepare for life in terms of disability. Mentoring should include subjects like the social model of disability.

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Appendix 1: Methodology

We used focus groups, typically with 3–4 participants per group. The focus group facilitator began by walking the participants through our research journey map, and having them complete a consent form (see Appendix III below). The discussion began with a self-portrait activity where participants drew a picture of themselves, and wrote down the things they think they are good at and the things they need help with.

They were then asked to discuss what they drew and wrote down, and what they thought of themselves, before going through the other questions. In most focus groups we were able to have the participants complete a second portrait activity, but of someone at their school who is different to them in some way. Focus groups lasted between 30 minutes and an hour.

1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Key Questions

1. **What attitudes do disabled children hold about themselves and their disability?**

    a. How do disabled young people think of themselves?

    b. How, if at all, do they feel their impairment affects their life?

    c. How do disabled children feel they are treated in school?

    d. How would disabled children like to be treated in school?

2. **What attitudes do disabled children hold about other disabled children?**

    a. How do they view other disabled children with the same or similar disabilities?

    b. How do they view children with different disabilities from them?

3. **What attitudes do non-disabled pupils hold about their disabled classmates/disabled people/disability in general?**

    a. What do non-disabled children think about their disabled peers?

    b. How do non-disabled children feel they typically treat their disabled peers?

    c. What are non-disabled children's experiences of working with their disabled peers in school?

    d. What are non-disabled children's experiences of socialising with their disabled peers in school?

Secondary Questions

Questions that may or may not be answerable within the framework of this project

1. **Are the experiences/attitudes of disabled children any different in mainstream schools as opposed to special schools?**

    a. How do disabled children's experiences of special schools compare to disabled children's experiences of mainstream schools?

    b. How similar are disabled children in special schools' and disabled children in mainstream schools' attitudes towards disability?

2. **How similar are disabled children's and non-disabled children's views about their futures?**

   a. How similar are disabled children's and non-disabled children's aspirations for university?

   b. How similar are disabled children's and non-disabled children's career goals?

Focus Group Introduction and Ethics

> Please note- this 'introduction and ethics' section is <u>not</u> a script. Words can be adapted by the researcher. This section should be used for guidance only.

Hello, my name is [NAME]. I'm a researcher for [DRUK/LKMco] and I've come to talk to you about identity and disability. When I talk about identity, I mean the way we see or describe ourselves.

Before we start talking about identity and disability, I want to explain how our conversation will be used in our research. Let's look at this sheet of paper which shows our 'research journey'...

[Read and talk through research journey sheet]

[Ask if anyone has any questions]

Now we've looked at the research journey, let's see what we remember. I've got a couple of questions for you:

1. Why have I come to talk to you today?
2. Do you have to take part in this research?
3. What are we going to do in this session today?
4. I'm going to record our conversation today, what will I do with the recording?
5. Will we write about what you tell us?
6. When we write our report, will we put your name in it?

Now we know what the research will involve, I'd like to ask you about whether you agree to take part. This sheet of paper is called a 'consent form.' Let's read each statement. If you agree with the statement, please tick the 'yes' box, if you disagree please tick the 'no' box. You do not have to agree to take part in the research. You can also leave the discussion at any time if you do not want to keep going. If you decide to leave we will remove anything you have said from the transcript of the discussion unless you tell us otherwise.

[Check for understanding].

We're going to start by drawing/describing ourselves and our classmates. Then I'm going to ask you some questions about how you describe yourself, your classmates and what you think about disability. Like I said earlier, you don't have to answer the questions I ask you and you can leave at any time.

We are going to be talking about some difficult subjects today. Therefore, I want to make sure that we have a safe space for people to talk about their views. To do that, we need to make sure that we:

- Listen to other people whilst they are talking;
- Do not talk about other people in a way that might upset them;
- Respect each other by not talking about what other people have said outside of the room;
- If you feel uncomfortable with any of the discussions we have, you can use the safe-word "no thanks" and we will stop talking about that specific subject.

Focus group: handling difficult conversations

To ensure that no harm is caused to young people, the focus group facilitator should set ground rules (see above).

If a young person uses the safe-word "no thanks", the focus group facilitator should either:

- Move the conversation on by asking a new question
  or
- Stop the focus group *if the overall discussion has become harmful to young people (e.g. if young people continuously use offensive language or try to upset other young people in the group).* If this happens, the focus group facilitator should:
  - Tell young people that the focus group will end;
  - Inform the school as soon as possible;
  - Inform the school's, LKMco's and DRUK's safeguarding officer about the incident and arrange a de-briefing session with young people if this is deemed appropriate.

The decision to take either of the two steps listed above will be based on what is appropriate in the individual situation.

Focus group: tasks and questioning

Drawing tasks will be modelled by the focus group facilitator. See pages 42 and 43 for resource sheets.

Where the drawing task is not suitable for certain groups of young people (e.g. visually impaired), we will make adaptations on a case-by-case basis.

Focus group questions are listed in the table below. The focus group facilitator should *always* ask the questions in bold. Other questions should be used as prompts where needed.

Research question	Task	Timing
1 a, b	**'Self-portrait/describing yourself'** As an introductory task, young people will be asked to create a 'self-portrait' they will be given the option of either: a) Drawing b) Writing words c) Doing both The focus group facilitator will model this by drawing/writing/describing themselves. The focus group facilitator can engage in discussion with young people as they are drawing and ask questions.	10 minutes

1 a, b	**Questioning**
	1. How would you describe yourself?
	    a) Can you explain what you've drawn/written?
	        i) Why did you draw/write that?
	    b) Is there anything that you think makes you stand out?
	    c) Is there anything that makes you different from other people you know?
		5 minutes

1 c, d	**'Describing what you like/are good at'**	10 minutes
	Young people will be asked to:	
	a. Draw/write the things *they enjoy about school or are good* at on the left-hand side of their page.	
	b. Draw/write the things they *dislike about school or need help with* on the right- hand side of their page.	
	The focus group facilitator will model this by drawing/writing/describing themselves.	
	The focus group facilitator can engage in discussion with young people as they are drawing and ask questions.	
1 c, d	**Questioning**	
	2. Describe what going to school is like	
	a) What, if anything, is enjoyable about school?	
	i) Can you explain what you have drawn/written?	
	ii) Why did you draw/write that?	
	b) What, if anything, is unenjoyable about school?	
	ii) Can you explain what you have drawn?	
	iii) Why did you draw that?	
	c) How do other people treat you in school?	
	i) How would you describe your group of friends?	
	ii) How do they make you feel?	
	d) Do you get any help to make things easier for you in school?	
	i) Can you give me an example of a time when you needed help in school? What happened?	
	e) Is there anyone in school you can go to for help when you need it?	
	i) Can you give me an example of a time when you went to this person for help?	
	f) Is there anything you would change about school?	
	i) If so, what would you change?	
2 a, b/ 3 a, b	**'Classmate portrait/describing others'**	5 minutes
	Young people will be asked to think about another pupil in their school *who is different to them.* They will be asked to:	
	a) Draw this pupil/write words to describe them.	
	b) On the left hand-side of the page draw/write words to describe what this pupil seems to be good at.	
	c) On the right hand-side of the page draw/write words to explain what this pupil seems to need help with.	
	The focus group facilitator will model this to young people using their workplace as an example.	

2 a, b/
3 a, b
	Questioning
	3. Thinking about your school, what sorts of different people are there?
	    a) How similar do you feel to other people in your school?
	        i) Can you explain why?
	        ii) Can you explain what you've drawn?
	    b) Is there anything in school that other people need more help with than you?
	        i) Can you explain what you have drawn?
	    c) Is there anything in school that people who are different from you are really good at?
	        i) Can you explain what you have drawn?
		5 minutes

3 a, b, c
1 a
2 a, b
	Questioning
	4. Now we're going to talk through what disability means to you. What do you think the word 'disabled' means?
	    a) What does it mean if someone is disabled?
	    b) Does anyone who is disabled go to your school?
	        i) Do you know them? How?
	        ii) How would you describe them?
	        iii) How similar or different do you feel you are to them? Can you explain why?
	    c) Do you know anyone who is disabled outside of school?
	        iii) How do you know them?
	        iv) How would you describe them?
	        v) How similar or different do you feel you are to them? Can you explain why?
		5 minutes

N/A	**Questioning** 5. How similar or different do you feel you are to them? Can you explain why?	1 minute

## 2 SELF-PORTRAIT WORKSHEET

THINGS I'M GOOD AT:

THINGS I NEED HELP WITH:

ME

2 SELF-PORTRAIT WORKSHEET
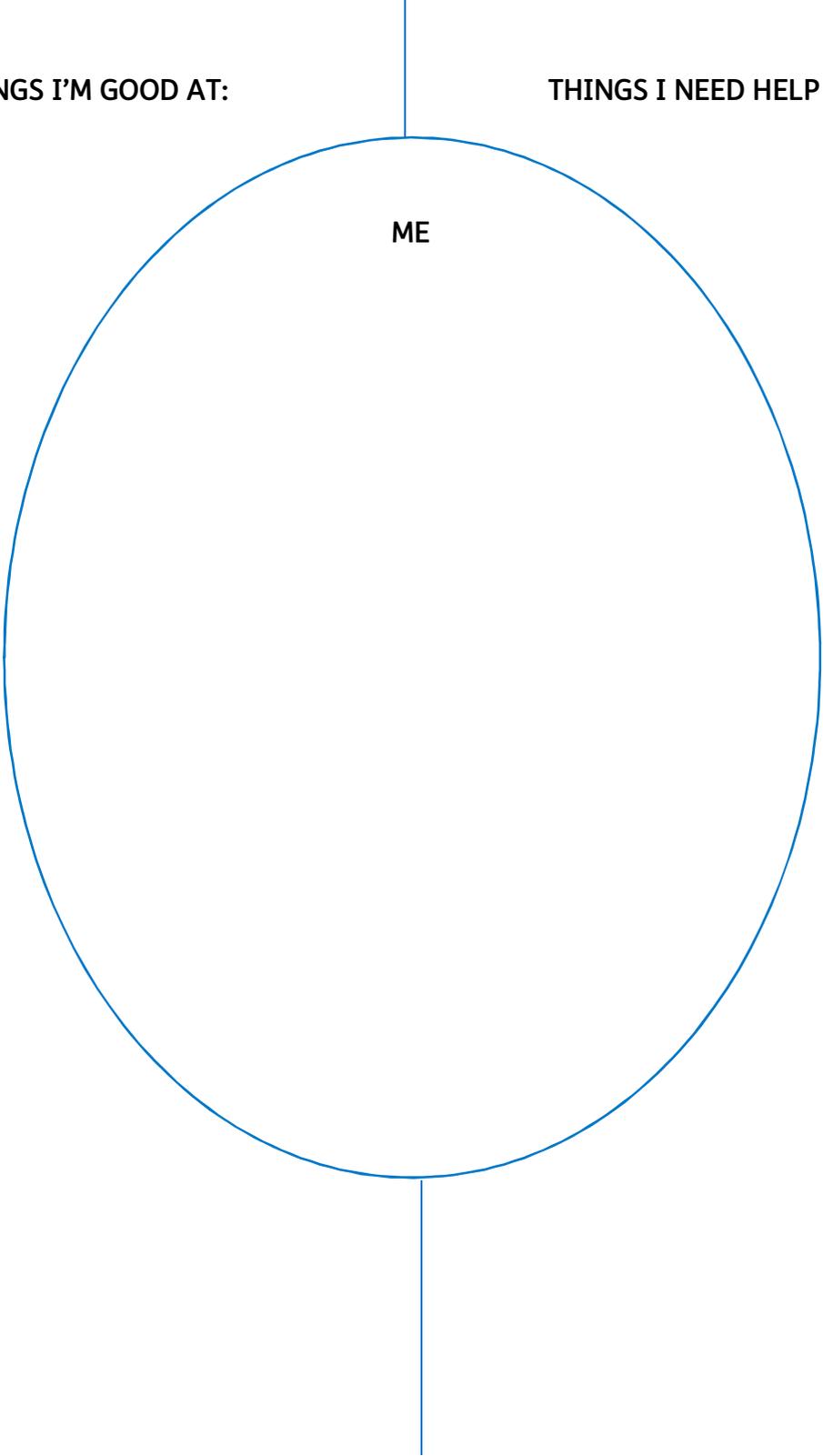
3   PEER PORTRAIT WORKSHEET

THINGS I'M GOOD AT: THINGS I NEED HELP WITH:
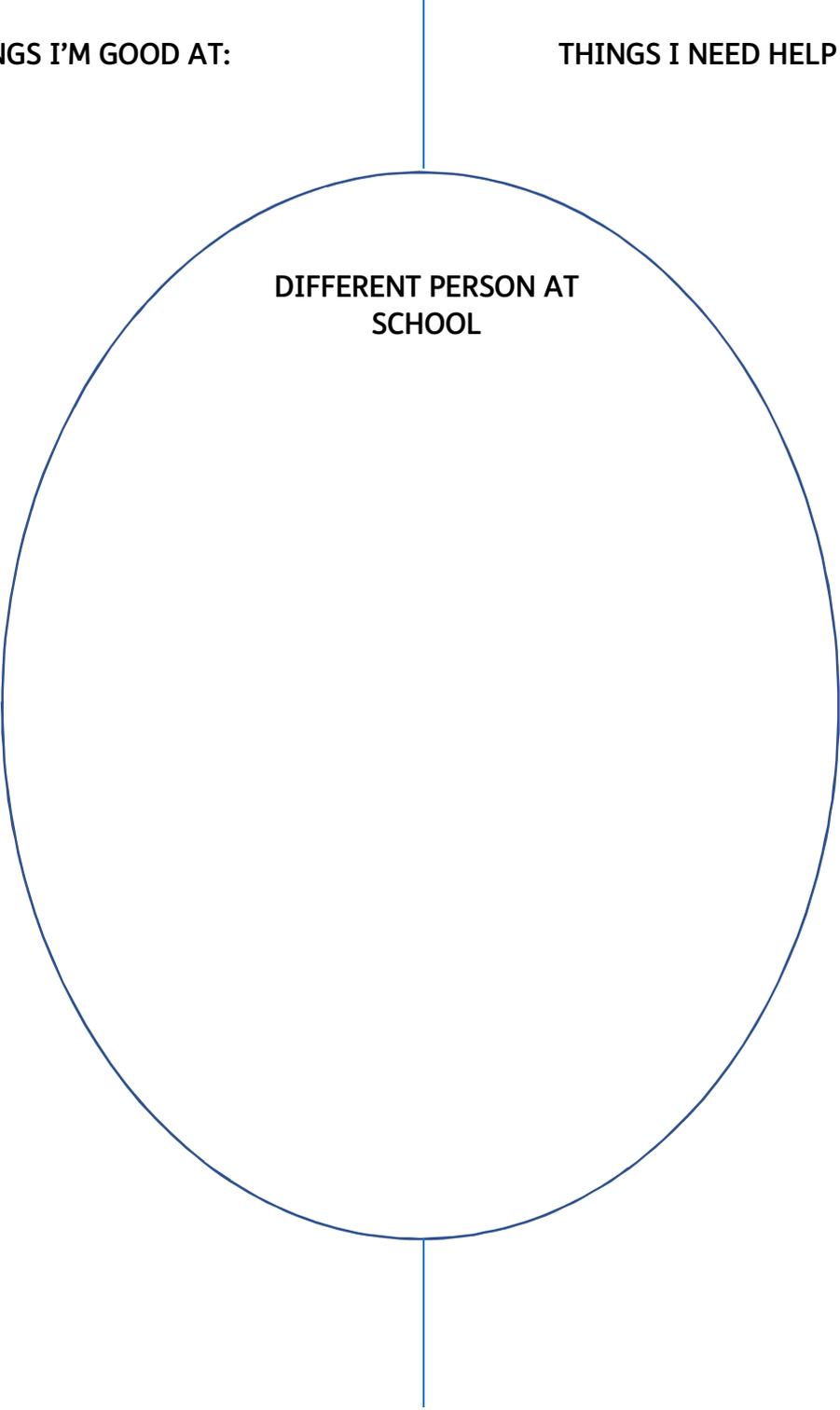
DIFFERENT PERSON AT
SCHOOL

3   PEER PORTRAIT WORKSHEET

4 SCHOOL AND PUPIL SAMPLING

We selected a mixture of mainstream and special schools for focus groups. For mainstream schools we asked schools to identify either a group of pupils with SEND or a group of pupils without SEND to take part in the focus groups. All focus groups were held in state-funded schools. Schools were able to use their discretion when deciding which pupils to approach about taking part in the focus groups.

Every mainstream school that we held a focus group at reported more than 10% of their students received SEND support or had an EHCP, and all but one mainstream school had proportions of students with SEND above the national average for mainstream secondary schools, according to the 2018 "Special educational needs in England" set of statistics (Department for Education, 2018).

Defining SEND

We defined SEND pupils as anyone with a SEN statement or EHCP, or who receives special educational support without a statement or EHCP. This definition is based on sections 20 and 21 of the Children and Families Act 2014. In effect it is any child who receives at least some education that is different or additional to what is typically provided to children of the same age, and they are receiving this education because of a disability or learning difficulty. Throughout the report we use the terms "pupil with SEND" or "SEND pupil" to refer to anyone receiving any kind of special education.

Appendix 2: Codes

We used the following set of hierarchical codes to code focus group transcripts.

Family Members

Life Goals

Perception of Disability

- Definition of disability
- Disabled people at school
  - Witnessing Bullying
- Disabled people outside school
- Own disability
- Similar to disabled people
- Views about disabled people

Perception of Self

- Different from others
- Negative self-perception
- Things good at
  - Things I like
- Things need help with

School

- Other people in school
  - Bad People
  - Different to
  - Drawing subject
    - Different to (drawing)
    - Good at (drawing)
    - Help with (drawing)
    - Similar to (drawing)
  - Good People
  - Similar to
- Social Group
  - Enforced social groups
  - Friends
- Support in School
  - Asking for help
  - Others getting support
- Treated in school
  - Treated Negatively
    - Bullied
  - Treated Neutral
  - Treated Positively
- Views on School
  - Change about school
    - Facetious
    - Serious
  - Negative about school
    - Teachers (Negative)
  - Positive about school

Appendix 3: Ethics

1 PUPIL CONSENT FORMS

STANDARD

Please tick either 'Yes' or 'No' for each sentence.
If you tick 'No' you will not be able to participate in the group discussion.

	Yes	No
I have read the information sheet and understand what the research is about	☐	☐
If I had any questions about the research, I have asked them	☐	☐
I am happy to take part in a group discussion	☐	☐
I agree not to discuss what other participants in the group discussion say with other people	☐	☐
I understand that I don't have to take part in the research, that I can leave at any time, and I don't have to give a reason why	☐	☐
I understand that my words will be shared with other people, but my name won't be shared	☐	☐
I agree to participate in this research project	☐	☐

Your name:

Your school:

Date:

EASY READ

Participant Consent Form

I would like to ask you how you think about yourself, how you find going to school, and what you think about disability.

I will ask you things like:

- What you think about yourself
- What you think of your school
- What you think about other people in school
- What you think about disability

Do you want to talk to me about these things, in a small group of young people?

Please put a circle around your answer:

- You do not have to answer any questions you do not like.
- If you do not want to talk about something, just say "no thanks"
- You can stop taking part and leave the discussion at any time.

Is it O.K. if I record our chat?

Please put a circle around your answer:

YES   NO
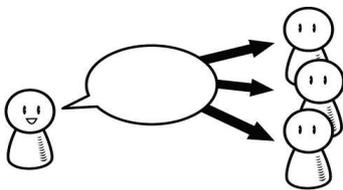
Can I tell other people what you say? I will not tell anyone your name or which school you go to.

Please put a circle around your answer:

YES   NO

This is a safe space, and we will all respect each other's stories.

You must not tell anyone outside this group the names of the other people here. You must also promise not to share any notes from the group that you may be sent.

Do you agree?

YES   NO

Please put a circle around your answer:

Have I answered any questions that you might have?

YES   NO

Please put a circle around your answer:

Please write <u>your name</u> in the box below.

Please write <u>the name of your school</u> in the box below.

Please write <u>today's date</u> in the box below.

Thank you for completing this consent form.

2 RESEARCH JOURNEY MAP
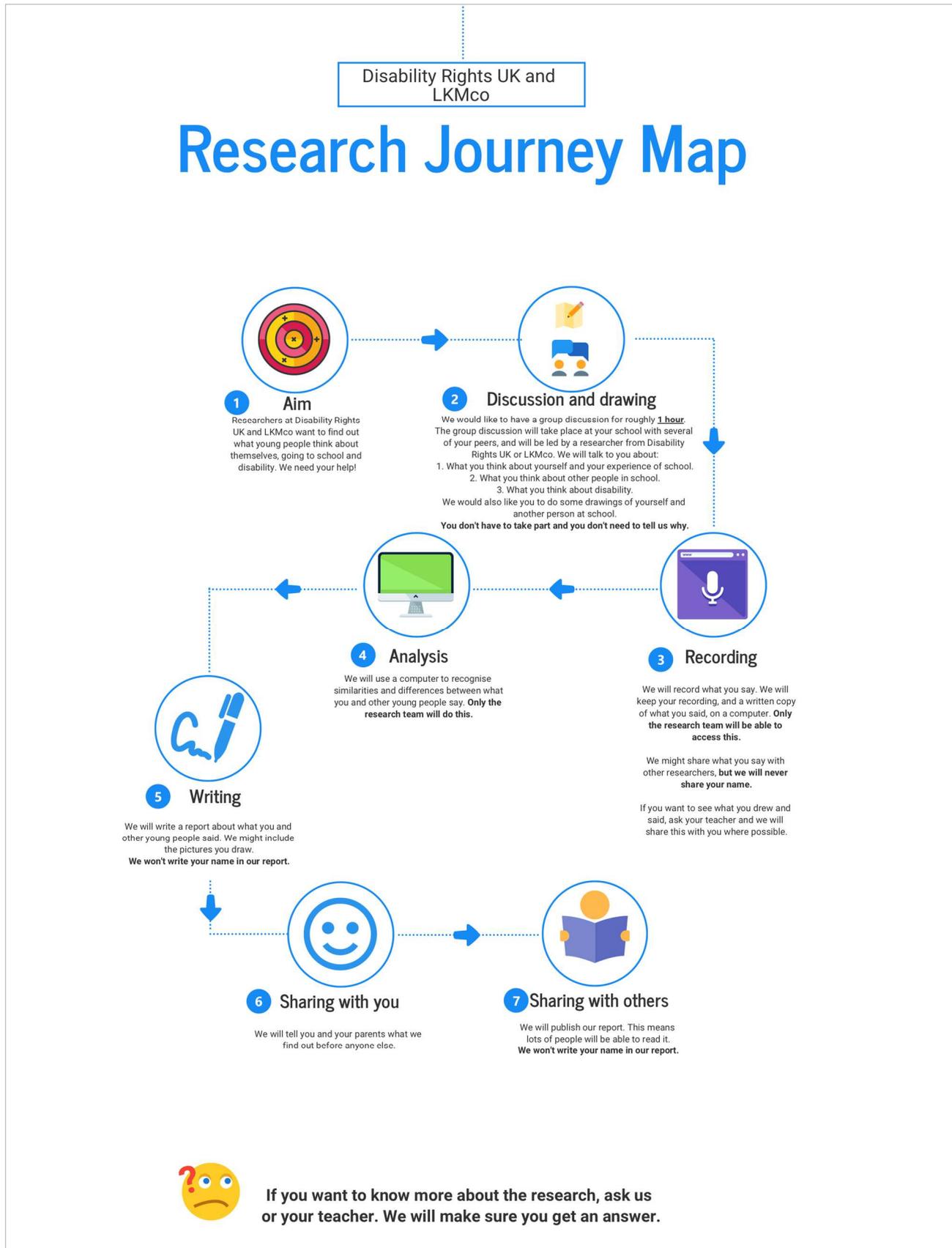
The above research journey map was given to pupils printed on A3 paper.