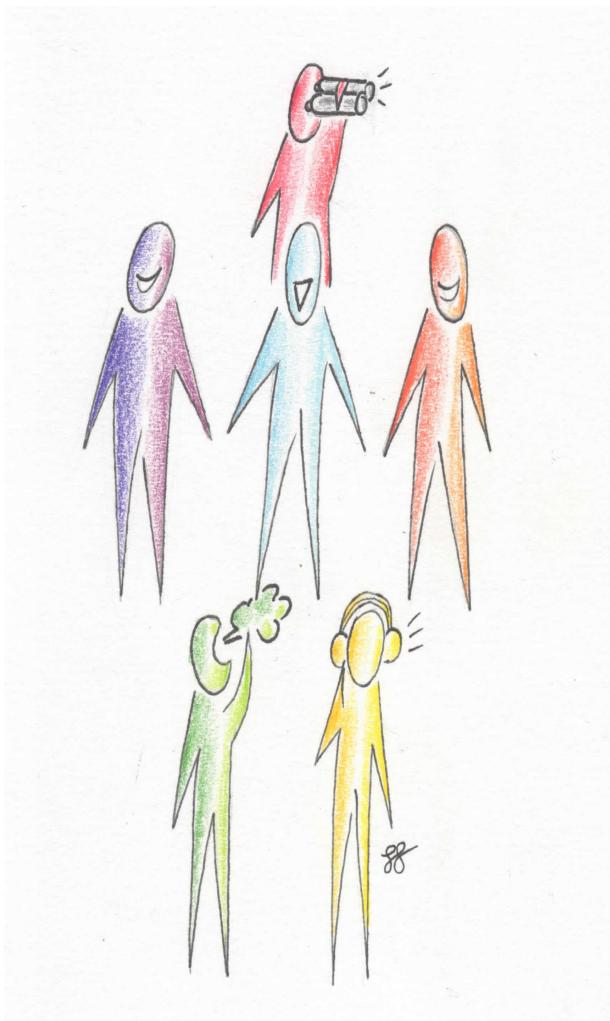


**With a Little Help from my Friends:  
'Circle of Friends' - supporting children and young people  
with additional support in Scotland's mainstream schools**

**Raymond Brennan**

**ENABLE Scotland**

**Final Report: July 2015**



*"PEOPLE*

*LISTENING OUT FOR YOU,  
WATCHING OUT FOR YOU,*

*SPEAKING TO YOU AND FOR  
YOU,*

*AND MOST OF ALL*

*SUPPORTING YOU"*

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## Executive Summary

This research project's underlying theme is around the challenges that people with learning disabilities face with relationships and friendships. Having worked with people with learning disabilities for the past 29 years, I have always found that the biggest challenge for people living in local communities was to have a sense of belonging, to be welcomed by other members of the community in which they live and to form lasting friendships. This research is concerned with the early years' experience of children with learning disabilities and additional support needs around friendships.

This research has focused on the knowledge and experience that parents and their children have of one approach: 'The Circle of Friends,' and explores its potential to improve the experiences that children have when they are at risk of being excluded from mainstream settings, in particular school settings.

The research was carried out using a mixed method approach of quantitative and qualitative methods, the findings support the promotion of a Circle of Friends approach in schools and my data, limited though it is, would suggest that this approach is entirely consistent with SHANNARI outcomes and GIRFEC.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to take this opportunity to thank a number of individuals who have helped me with my research journey and this particular research project. Their guidance and support throughout the past year has been fantastic. I have navigated a tremendous learning curve and continue to learn.

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Who help me source the large number of families for the initial information gathering, and for their continued support of the project working as partners on some of the recommendations.

**All of the families** across Scotland who took time to respond to the questionnaire and provided the initial data to help shape the research work.

Particular thanks go out to one parent who gave up her time to meet with me to share her story and to helped my research by sharing her knowledge and awareness of the real issues for children in schools across Scotland as a parent and a professional working in this field.

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## 1. Introduction

Having very few or no friends has become a lasting feature in the lives of many people with learning disabilities. In a recent survey carried out by Enable Scotland in 2015 one hundred and thirteen people were asked four questions based on the key recommendations from the 'Keys to Life' 'Scotland's learning disability strategy. Launched in 2013, it builds on the success of 'The same as you?' the previous strategy which was published in 2000'. A conclusion from this survey reported – “**5.2** the striking theme of friendships and relationships was the 'golden thread' of the initial discussion groups, and this should direct early focus on implementing the Keys to Life.” (“All you need is love, Enable Scotland,” 2015)

It is highlighted in the 'Keys to Life' that isolation has a massive detrimental impact on quality of life and health and wellbeing. Recommendation 34 of 'The Keys to Life' focuses on supporting people with learning disabilities to have more friends. (ASP Group Scotland, Scottish Government, 2013: 74).

When I consider where we learn about relationships and friendship, how complex but natural a process this is, I think back to school days. “There are those who argue that the school's role is solely to instil learning in children, but Article 29 of the UN convention suggests a somewhat broader perspective. Education, it suggests, should be directed at developing the child's personality and talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential' but should also be 'fostering respect for basic human rights and developing respect for the child's own cultural and national values and those of others” (Wertheimer, 1997: 14).

Within the current Scottish system school aged children have in the main a choice of mainstream school, special needs classroom within a mainstream school, or special needs school (Education (Additional Support for Learning) Act (Scotland) 2004 and 2009).

“Inclusive education is concerned with the quest for equity, social justice and participation. It is about the removal of all forms of barriers of discrimination and

oppression and it is about the well-being of all learners.” (“Teacher newsmagazine,” n.d.)

## **2. Background information and literature review**

The Education (Additional Support for Learning) Act (Scotland) 2004 and 2009 replaces the system created by the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 for the recording and assessment of special educational needs for children. The process of creating a 'Record of Needs' in the 1980 legislation has been replaced with a system of co-ordinated support plans for each child identified as having significant additional support needs. Under section 9 of the 2004 Act, where it has been established that a local education authority has responsibility for the child's education and the child has additional support needs, they have a duty to provide a co-ordinated support plan for the child. This legislation has been amended by the Act of 2009. (Education (Additional Support for Learning) Act (Scotland) 2004 and 2009).

SHANARRI is a framework developed by the Scottish government to help measure wellbeing outcomes for children and young people as part of GIRFEC (Getting in right for every child) which was developed following the Children's Charter. The acronym SHANARRI stands for the following outcome measures: Safe, Healthy, Active, Nurtured, Achieving, Respected, Responsible and Included. (Scottish Government, 2005)

The 'Circle of Friends' approach is used to help children and/or young people at risk of segregation from mainstream settings in their communities. The aim of this approach is to build a 'team' around the child or young person by inviting their peers to become part of the circle.

In schools, this approach is used to develop a circle filled with other children in the classroom. This helps everyone in the circle develop a better understanding of the child/ young person and to help think about what help the child or young person may need from their peers/circle, to be fully included in the classroom and in school.

The 'Circle' approach means that everyone can play their part in the solution. This approach is based on the value of reciprocity.

'Circle of friends' is an approach that focuses on helping people who are finding it difficult to participate in mainstream situations. "The approach promotes the inclusion of individuals who face the greatest risk of rejection or isolation from the community in which they live because of their disability, behaviour or difference" (Newton & Wilson, 2003: 12).



### 3. Method

This research project's underlying theme is around relationships and friendships of people with learning disabilities. The research question is: Can the 'Circle of Friends' approach help children and young people with additional support needs achieve some of their outcomes (SHANARRI, Scottish Government, 2005) in Scotland's mainstream schools?

This research has adopted an initial mixed method approach in order to explore the knowledge and experiences of parents and children using 'Circle of Friends'. I had access through my work to two hundred and sixty parents across Scotland. The questionnaire was created electronically through survey monkey which included explanations of the 'Circle of Friends' approach and SHANARRI, Forty questionnaires were sent by post with consent letters which further explained my role as the researcher and how the data would be stored safely and treated with confidence respecting the anonymity of each of the participants, the research included prepaid envelopes to maximise return. Based on initial feedback from parents recruited through Rascals, a local group, I developed a short questionnaire with the key questions to help establish if I needed to think differently about my approach. I asked three colleagues to answer the questionnaire and provide feedback prior to meeting with the group of parents. At an early stage of the research I made the decision to focus on engaging with parents as the ethical issues involved in engaging with the children themselves may have not been manageable within the timescales of the project.

With questionnaires in hand, I met with the group of parents and the feedback was that there was a general interest in the 'Circle of Friends' approach. Each set of parents was given a questionnaire to record their thoughts and to respond to some of the questions in their own time in the privacy of their own homes.

I analysed the responses of thirty parents as they came through and what worked really well was to read through each individual's written comments on the questions as this help develop a better understanding of each individual's experience which

has been reflected in the findings. It also helped get a sense of the range of experiences, thoughts and feelings on the research topic.

### **3.1 Focus group**

There were thirty five responses which were varied and of these, thirteen participants had agreed to help further and were invited to attend a focus group session.

The focus group was the intended approach. Focus groups are a really good way to bring people together to share their experiences and understanding and to debate their differing opinions. It creates a good basis for understanding more than one person's thoughts and opinions and the range of data can be helpful in creating a good argument for the research question. It has its limitations as it is time limited and some people may speak more than others so there is potential not to hear everyone. There are approaches to this that can be really helpful to ensure everyone's voice is heard, it also helps everyone make a contribution to the data as it does not require participants to read or write. The facilitator should also be aware of their own bias when both facilitating the session and when capturing the learning as they would be required to validate any conclusions. (Kitzinger, 1995). As I found to my peril it is very difficult to get a number of participants to agree to meet at a particular time or place, arranging focus groups can be practicably very difficult, and this proved impossible to achieve within the timescales.

Interviewing individuals is another really helpful way to collect qualitative data. This provides the interviewee with your undivided attention and if questions are structured but open the interviewer should get a good sense of that person's opinion. However they are very time consuming and can take a long time to set up and to transcribe. It is normally most helpful to have two or more interviews but this limited audience can only provide you with what they think, it is important to validate the information shared by one or two individuals, often the most effect way to do this is to triangulate the information with existing data.

Documentary analysis is another really helpful method in a triangulated approach to what you have learned from interviews, case studies or focus groups. The challenge for using this approach is that you cannot interact with the words on the paper; you

only have this written information which is often open to interpretation. Documentary analysis can either be content analysis, semiotics, discourse analysis, or conversation analysis. Each of these approaches provides a different method of understanding and interpreting what has been written.

Unfortunately there was only one of the participants who could attend the focus group. There were three offers from the original participant of thirteen who expressed a desire to continue to be involved. I arranged to meet with each of the participants to have a semi structured interview, only one was available within the time frame due to illness and a family emergency. One interview was arranged for a later date that suited the individual.

I made the decision to use the opportunity to meet with the family and to develop a case study based on their experience. The family were very welcoming and they invited the author to join them for an evening meal, this created a very natural and relaxed atmosphere, after sharing a meal the family began to discuss their experience from the early years of their son's life. Everyone agreed that I could record the conversation and consented to this record being used for the project.

I recorded the meeting which used a semi structured interviewing process lasting 42 minutes. Both parents and their son consented to have their information shared in an anonymised way. At the end of the interview with the family, I asked them to share what the key themes were for them and what message they would want to share with other parents, children and you people. I transcribed this interview verbatim and read and re read the transcription in order to pull on the key themes which match with the families. I checked this back with the family through email and they agreed with what had been written.

The key themes arising were triangulated with the existing data set to answer this research question. The sketch on the front cover of this report was created by the young man who shared his story and is his artistic impression of his 'Circle of Friends'

## **3.2 Case study method**

### **a. Participant's history and background**

JB was a four year old boy with a diagnosis of Autism; JB lived at home with both parents and his younger sibling. JB's parents were concerned about him going to mainstream school too early. They met the consultant who said he would never be able to go to mainstream and would be lucky to cope with special needs school, advising parents to send him away to residential school and 'love the other child they have'. JB's parents were devastated by this and decided to fight for their son's rights.

### **b. Learning about the Circle of Friends approach**

Both parents starting looking out for things that might help, and went on a course which included international speakers who gave them hope and inspiration. Mum signed up for an Open University course on Autism to try to learn as much as she could to help. One key thing they left the international course with was the 'Circle of Friends' approach. This helped them think about what might help JB. The school listened and agreed to make this happen, all parents agreed and the circle was formed. The circle helped JB to cope with some of the challenges he faced every day in school. Circles are based on values of reciprocity, and in practice JB helped other circle members, one with spelling, others with their communication.

### **c. The Circle**

JB had a circle throughout his schooling but relied less on this as he developed his social skills and learned about some of the social 'rules' you need to follow in school. JB left school with the qualifications he needed to be accepted onto a mainstream college course. JB talks about his circle fondly - he said 'it just felt really natural to get help from others and to help them too'. JB is still in touch with one of his first circle members who says that 'he is her oldest friend.'

#### ***d. Benefits***

JB has friends at college and they go out for drinks regularly, he says that they don't need to know about his disability. He doesn't need a circle anymore because he learned about friendship throughout his school experience and would want other parents to know this.

### **3.4 Semi structured interview**

I felt it important to have a balance to my research by listening to the experiences from a family who had never heard of the 'Circle of Friends' approach. It was absolutely necessary to understand the ethnography of the people who have had the real life experiences that would contribute to answering the research question. (Holloway, 2005)

I met with a parent (whom he will call Sarah to protect her anonymity) who had expressed an interest in learning more. Sarah consented to having the interview recorded and the record used anonymously for the project. Sarah has a son age seven years with Down's syndrome. Since the birth of her son Sarah has spent the past seven years of her life learning from and understanding her son and about Down's syndrome. She has developed such an expert knowledge and understanding that she now works professionally across Scotland with schools providing training and advice to teaching staff. Her own son attends a special needs school, which she and her husband chose. Sarah does have concerns about her son's future and the network of people and friends he has, as he grows. She is also thinking longer term about what life will be like for her son when she is no longer around.

I used the interview to ask Sarah what the key messages or themes were for her. I transcribed this interview and pulled out the key themes:

- The Circle of Friends was not common knowledge and could be the missing link - although working professionally with schools around inclusion and understanding behaviours of children with learning disabilities
- Break times create most anxieties as children can find themselves isolated from other children - Sarah shared her experiences as a parent and a professional and highlighted that one of the key things that cause children

with additional support needs anxiety at school was mainly around break times, as children can find themselves isolated from the other children for various reasons. She shared that 'one school had a bus stop that a child would go to if they had no one to play with and that seemed to work but didn't seem really fair that a child would have to go there to wait for someone to come to invite them to play, but the children didn't seem to mind'. Sarah stated that the 'Circles of Support' approach from what I had explained could be the missing link to overcoming most of the problems children are having with the social aspect of school.

- The classroom assistant is a great resource. She was clear that the classroom assistant was a great resource for children **in** the classroom, but outwith the classroom there is little or no support. Sarah indicated that she would be speaking to her own manager to look at how they may start to implement the 'Circles' approach. Sarah suggested that a project could be set up in one local authority area one in a primary school and one in a secondary school. Stories should be available from families who have experience of the 'Circles' approach and create a way to share these stories within the project.

Sarah was also keen to explore the Circle approach in special needs school as she was thinking of her own son and how he talks about other children in his class but outwith school there is no connection even when he passes his classmates in the street. I had shared that any mainstream setting can be used to develop a circle and youth clubs, cubs and scouts can be another place to start. I indicated that within the special needs schools the 'Circles of Friends' model could be explored although it was developed to prevent people at risk of segregation from mainstream setting.

Qualitative methods of research help to create a better understanding of what people think and feel, which is hard to establish if using a quantitative approach. Qualitative data is not so concerned with numbers of people but more about the quality of information they can share through discussion and through asking open questions to get a sense of what people think and feel about any particular topic or question. Using a qualitative approach helps you to really begin to understand the opinions of others; it is viewed as a person centred approach to research which values the

whole person and what they have to share. (Holloway, 2005) There are a number of methods to this approach which can be used in different circumstances.

Often one has to consider the practicalities of collecting review data when striving to answer research questions. This particular research piece was carried out using a mixed method approach for two functions to capture the points of view of many and to help recruit a participant for further research. Questionnaires with yes or no answers would be considered quantitative but when you create a space for the participants to write their thoughts and feelings onto paper you begin to collect data that you can use in a more qualitative way it could be argued that you have moved from quantitative to qualitative.

### **3.5 Reflexivity**

I continually attempted find ways to learn from others, the challenge was to find ways to bring people together for the purpose of the research. “Intellectual and emotional demands of doing research call for a conscious and critical engagement with one’s own performance” (MacFarlane, 2008: 124). Had I used my tacit knowledge I would have realised that to host a focus group I should have gone to already formed groups and asked for some of their time and had the opportunity to recognise this during my first encounter with the parents group which even then had diminished in numbers. Sixteen were expected and only nine parents were there on the night. The research data become very limited as only one family could commit to the interviews within the time frame. I focused on the key messages from one family and searched for data that would validate this data but this may have created a bias to the findings.

### **3.6 Ethics**

Before making contact with any of the potential participants it was important to consider any ethical issues in undertaking the study. Ethics were considered using Edinburgh University guidelines and that of British Educational Research Association. (“Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research 2011 | BERA,” n.d.)

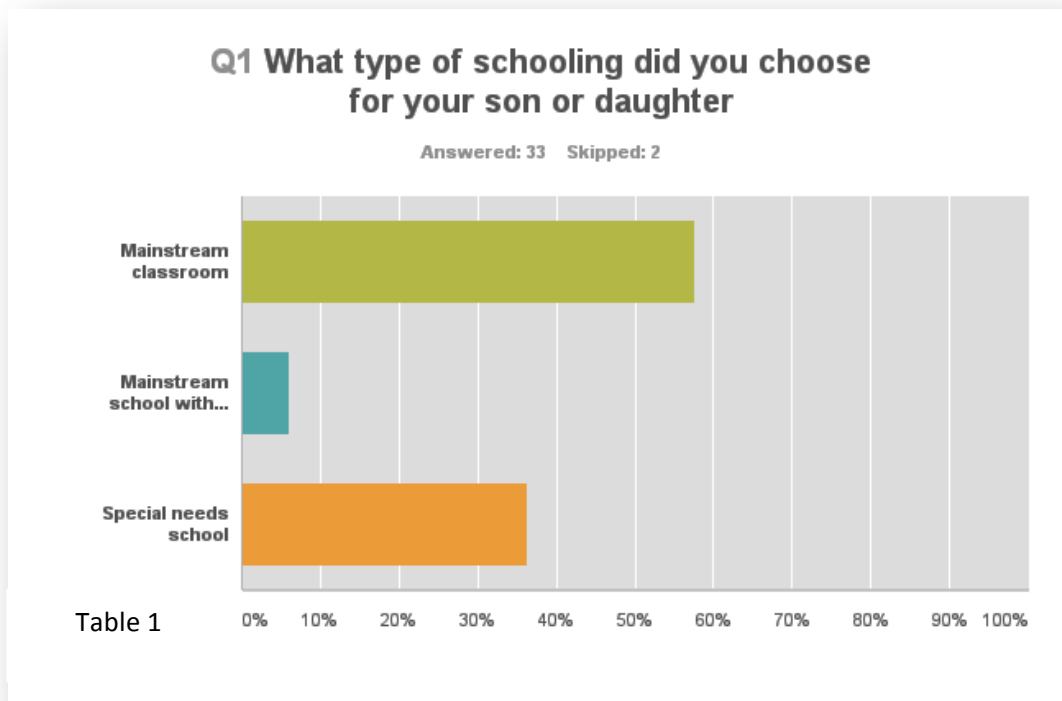
The ethics process I used was the internal ENABLE Scotland process, completing the level one form, then sought and gained approval to proceed from my line manager.



## 4. Findings

The four main questions can be viewed in the graphs below:

Each question provided an opportunity for respondents to share further information on their reasons for their choices for question 1. There were twenty seven written additional responses from the thirty five respondents. Table 1: shows that the number of parents choosing mainstream school is in the majority approximately 58% with approximately 36% opting for special needs schools and approximately 6 % opting for the mainstream school with a segregated classroom.



There were a variety of reasons for their choice with the following key themes:

<b>Mainstream School</b>	<b>Mainstream School with segregated classroom</b>	<b>Special needs school</b>
<p>Inclusive education Integration. Good school ethos and pastoral care. Smaller class size. Support bases only used when needed.</p>	<p>Well trained staff with community support from the school.</p>	<p>Specialist support. Knowledgeable and experienced teachers. Better communication. Childs needs can be met. Mainstream would be totally inappropriate.</p>
<p>Issues</p>	<p>Issues</p>	<p>Issues</p>
<p>Teachers need more training and are struggling. No choice.</p>	<p>Concern around friendships.</p>	<p>For some there was no choice - professionals decided. Seen as the only option.</p>

**Q2 Have you heard of the 'Circles of Friends' approach which can help some children who are finding their school experience difficult? Please comment in the space below**

Answered: 32 Skipped: 3

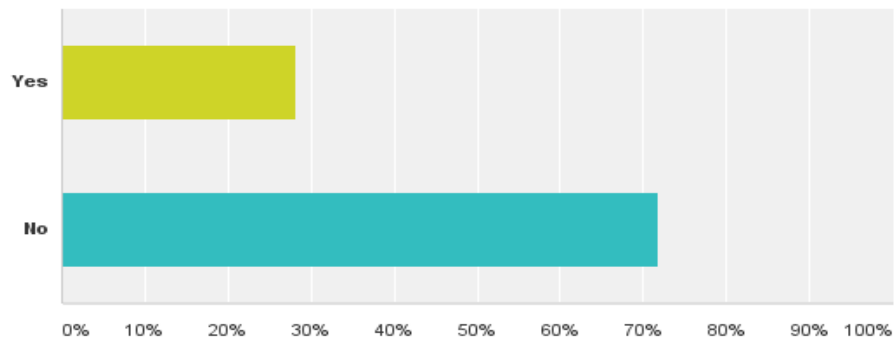


Table 2

Table 2 shows from the number of the respondents that approximately 70% of parents had never heard of the 'Circle of Friends' approach.

**Q3 Is this approach something that you have used, or been offered for your son or daughter?**

Answered: 31 Skipped: 4

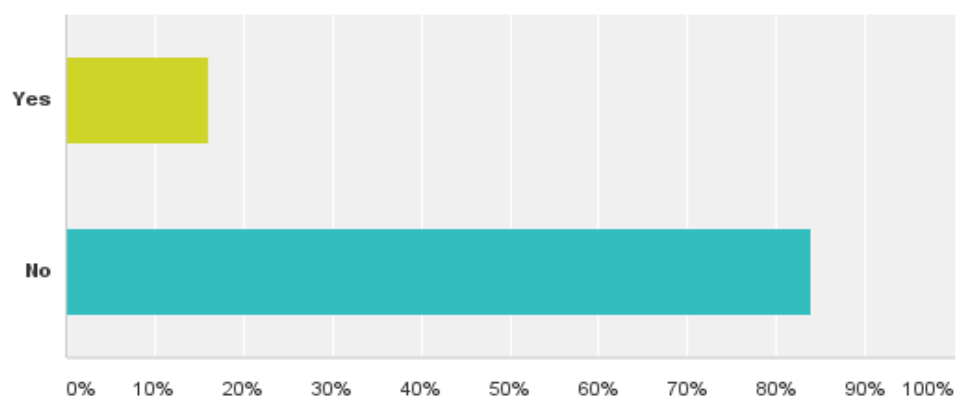


Table 3

Table 3 highlights that only 15% of respondents have used or been offered the 'Circle of Friends' approach.

Parents of children who had a 'circle' said:

*“The circle was girls and boys and they protected my daughter, nurtured her, looked out for her and enjoyed her company. It gave my daughter the gift of friendship and she felt safe and included “*

*“The difference it made to my son's schooling was vast - he was kept safe by students instead of teachers, where appropriate, making him feel less different. His anxiety was reduced by not having to explain his difficulties continuously. He was supported by a natural network - whom he was able to help, in turn, with the skills he possessed, which in many cases were not skills the circle possessed.”*

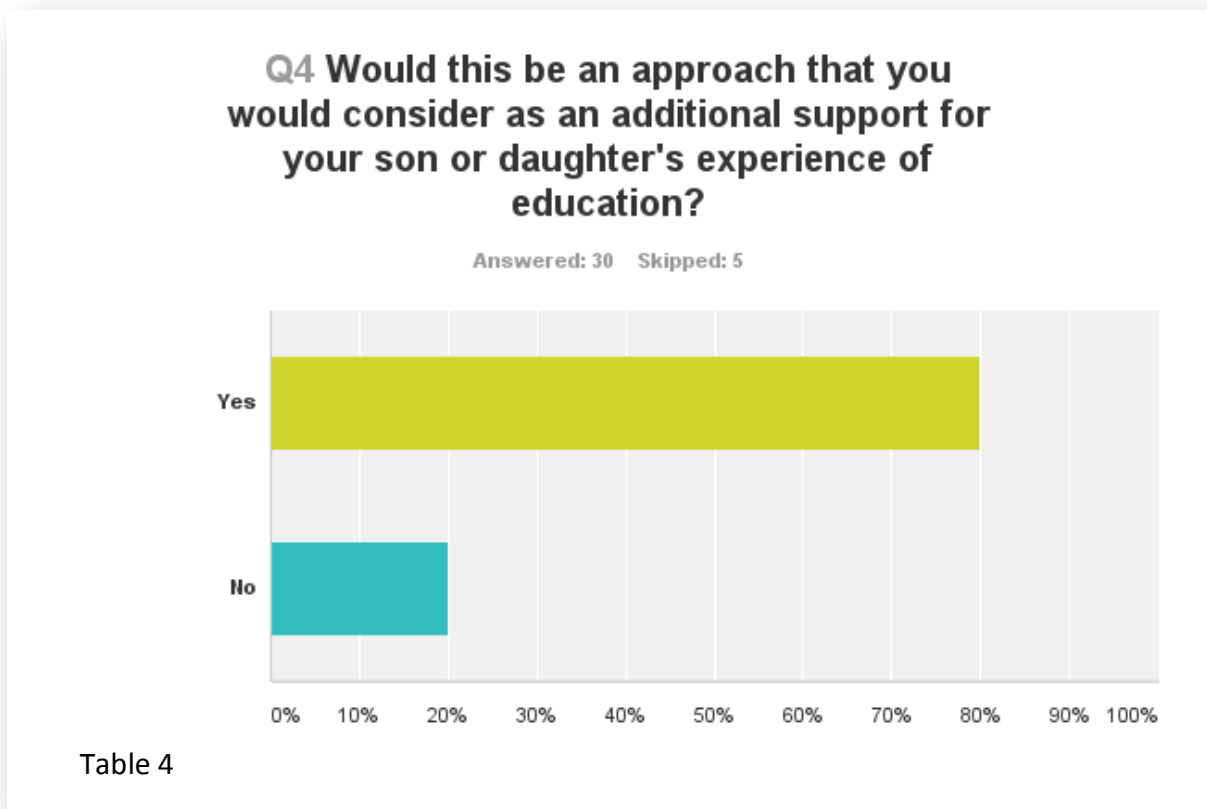


Table 4 indicates that 80% of Parents would consider this approach as they could recognise how this may help with some aspects of their child's experience of school.

Parents said:

*“Aye, this is not about resources ... it is about creating a place where it is easier to promote a level of reciprocity between folk.”*

*“Yes but would need further information about it to talk to school”*

*“I would try this as the child is only P2 and so has many years of education in front of her.”*

*“I think there is a tendency in schools for peers to judge behaviour that is different as misbehaviour and tell on the child adding to frustrations and fostering an environment that is that kid gets in trouble instead of openly discussing concerns with peers and involving them in supporting each other.”*

*“It sounds good -want him to have every opportunity to socialise and feel supported”*

*“School don't fully understand my daughter but due to where she is in the spectrum they think she can do things when she is struggling She has high anxiety and need for control but anxiety is not recognised with demand avoidance as school don't understand. They keep telling me my daughter isn't anxious. Even after she lashes out and they remove her control. To teach boundaries, resilience and compliance which puts anxiety higher and causes panic attacks which they fail to recognise. Dr's not trained in ASD so useless at helping us”*

*“Yes however would need more information regarding this scheme and how it would benefit her considering what she already has, would not want to make her any more anxious than she already is presently.”*

One of the 20% of parents who did not see this as an approach they would consider said:

*“I struggle to see what value it would provide and most likely just going to be disruptive.”*

Responses came from seven Local Authority areas:

Edinburgh Dundee Council East Dunbartonshire  
West Lothian Aberdeen South Ayrshire  
North Lanarkshire

The responses were used to initially establish how many parents had heard of the Circle of Friends' approach, if this had been something they had been offered to support their child's transition to school and if this is an approach that they would consider and establishing what difference this may or has made.

**Summary of Key findings from the research were:**

1. The advice given by professionals is not always the best course of action for the family. The family shared their experience of being told by a professional to love the other non-disabled child they had and they should send their disabled child to residential school; that he would never achieve milestones and never match up to any of his peers. The family felt they were being advised to 'write off' their child. They shared how devastating this message was to hear but that it gave them the determination to learn as much as they could to help their child to have the best chances at living a full and included life. This was an experience of parents in 2002 yet over the past 20 – 25 years across the world there has been a common agreement that all children have the right to be educated together. There has been a collection of International commitments to the principle of inclusive education and a major shift in thinking and policy towards education establishments being fit for

purpose, including all students no matter their differences or disability. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the UN Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993) (Salamanca Statement 1994) and UNESCO's Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action are all clear international commitments to end segregated education which takes away the right of children with disabilities to be part of mainstream schooling. These papers, which together make a strong case for inclusion, provide a unique opportunity to place inclusive education firmly on the agenda of national governments (Ncse, 2011).

Although only a small sample, twenty out of thirty five respondents had opted for mainstream school, two had opted for the segregated classroom in the mainstream school and thirteen had opted for special needs school. The common theme from the individual responses was for those in the mainstream school, they wanted their child to be included and to be best prepared for life after school, some common issues raised were the schools were struggling; teachers weren't trained but smaller class sizes appeared to help. The two parents who opted for the mainstream with segregated classroom indicated that the support was good and their child was connected within the community of the school. The thirteen who opted for special needs school were clearly saying that the school met the needs of the child and the support for their child was by experienced staff and the class sizes were smaller.

Why, from the data I have collected, does it seem that mainstream schools do not have the experienced staff to meet the needs of children with additional support needs? At present the training for new teachers has an optional inclusion module, and ENABLE Scotland is currently campaigning to make this a mandatory aspect of teacher training. The 'Bridging the Training Gap' campaign is one small step to improve the quality within mainstream schools. The Swift school framework has referred to the following research that would argue that inclusive education benefits all.

“Students without disabilities made significantly greater progress in reading and math when served in inclusive settings.” (Cole, Waldron, Majd, 2004)

Students with intellectual disabilities that were fully included in general education classrooms made more progress in literacy skills compared to students served in special schools. (Dessemontet, Bless, & Morin, 2012) cited (“SWIFT Schools,” n.d.)

2. Parents learning and becoming knowledgeable and empowered about their child’s disability, and what approaches help from across the globe. The case study family (family D) talked about their experience of hearing from some of the leaders in the inclusive movement through the ‘Partners in Policy Making’ course that was run by Heather Anderson SHS Scottish Human Services, and they shared how inspired they were by hearing from parents from across the globe, sharing their stories and experiences of what worked. These parents were meeting with heads of state to change policies and that helped the family put into perspective some of their own fears about approaching head teachers. This course provided the parents with all the information that they would need to help get things right for their son and to begin the engagement process with the school. This was when they heard of the Circle of Friends approach which Bob Perske had been promoting since 1988. The family were supported to think about ways that may help their son access the local mainstream school, and were also inspired by one of the keynote speakers. Mary Schuh, who has campaigned for many years on inclusive education and leads the SWIFT school framework. At the initial meeting with the group of parents, one set of parents shared that even though their son was attending a special needs school that this approach may be really helpful in his local youth club as he finds himself left out by the other children. This was at the early stages of the research which in hindsight would have been a great opportunity to host a focus group but the initial feedback was positive in the main. ‘Partners in Policy Making’ is being re- launched this coming year for more information see In-Control Scotland website.

<http://in-controlscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Partners-in-Policy-Making-Leaflet.pdf>



3. Schools being open to trying a new approach. Family D shared that the schools, although reluctant at the early stages, really embraced the 'Circle of friends' approach. When given the information they took the lead in making this a reality, the children selected felt really special and privileged to be asked to help, especially one of the boys who had a bit of a reputation as a 'bully' and he really flourished with this added responsibility and became more of a protector, which turned things around for him personally. Allan, (2008, page 9) states that "mainstream students suggested that they play a key role as 'inclusion gatekeepers'... allowing certain pupils to break some of the rules about pupil interaction. The mainstream pupils appeared to want to support inclusion because of the benefits to individual pupils with special needs.
  
4. 'Circles of friends' – one of the aspects which make the approach work is reciprocity. The family talked warmly about their experience of the Circle of friends and were very quick to point out that this was not a one sided support that their son helped other circle members as they help him out with some of his difficulties. The information was openly shared around the child's needs for support and what help he may need from the other children and that worked really well. "That's the basis for all human connections - the reciprocity and you were able to do that in a much more natural way than if that had been structured between an adult and the wean with special needs" (anonymous) direct quote from transcript. The family shared that being in a mainstream setting helped their son to develop socially and he learned how to be with other children. When he moved school in P5 he had another Circle set up but it was much looser than before because their son had learned so much from being in the mainstream school setting.
  
5. Outcome for child was much higher than original expectations of parents and a nothing like the messages they receive by the "professionals". The young person on leaving secondary education was more prepared for the real world, if they have a positive structured mainstream experience. Family D shared how if they reflect back to what the consultant told them when their son was aged four and what they thought themselves about what his future may look like, they never imagined that he would have done so well on all levels and

that he would be completing a mainstream college course where he can express his artistic gifts and passions, have a group of close friends who have also a real interest in this form of art. Dad shared that “It’s hard to imagine that if you said to me twelve years ago this is where he is going to be now with what we had, it’s light years away” For the young man who shared his story it appeared he was living a life that he wanted and he was living the dream, if you reflect on the SHANARRI wellbeing framework a part of the research questions one could argue that the circle of support approach which was set up in nursery preschool helped contribute to the positive outcomes throughout his life.

The positive outcomes for this young man appear to be that he is truly included by having friends in the mainstream setting and doing normal things with friends, like going to the pub after college; finding and planning ways to be safe and responsible; feeling good and excited about a positive future which may promote good health; being nurtured and nurturing others; respected for his achievements and the contribution he makes; having things to do where he can use his talent and be active and achieving.

## 5. Conclusion

The research question asked can the 'Circles of Friends' approach help children and young people with additional support needs achieve some of their outcomes (SHANARRI) (Scottish Government, 2005) in Scotland's mainstream schools. It was initially intended to seek data from parents, teachers and children with learning disabilities, due to the time restraints and the practicalities of resources; I opted to meet with parents, who would decide if their son or daughter would want to participate in their presence. ENABLE Scotland has approximately three hundred families who have already given their consent to be involved in any research projects which questionnaires were sent.

The family who agreed to share their story were one of the original three hundred participants who were sent the questionnaire. They felt so strongly about the benefits of the "Circle of Friends' approach that they went the extra mile to share their story. Of all the families engaged with, this one family wanted to tell their story most, and their reason for sharing was that it might help other families in similar situations to think of the future for their child and help plan for a positive future.

From this experience and from other data, the Circle of Friends approach would appear to help children and young people to achieve some of their outcomes in mainstream schools, but the message from the family was that this could not be successful without the additional resources that each child may need. School must be willing to embrace the idea and lead the way in making this approach a reality. The key is the partnership work of the parents and the schools.

## 6. Recommendations

- To raise awareness by working in partnership with the campaigns section of Enable Scotland to introduce the Circle of Friends approach with a focus on teacher training and teacher development, producing good clear information that can be introduced to Nurseries and Schools across Scotland, starting with one local authority area at a time. Teachers need to be shown how of 'Circle of Friends' can help children and young people with learning disabilities and/or additional support needs move closer to achieving their outcomes (SHANARRI), overcoming some of the barriers to attending mainstream school.
- To create a good resource for individuals, their parents and schools to use including stories from people who can share their experiences of their Circle of Friends. This will be rolled out as a campaign "The missing link to inclusive education", and may provide an additional option to help meet the SHANARRI outcomes for children and young people and support main stream education 'get it right for every child'.
- To partner up with the "Be the change" campaign which aims to reduce the incidence of bullying of children and young people with additional support needs. To explore funding streams to help establish a project in one local authority area and to build on the learning of this work.
- To develop a pilot project with two schools in one local authority area and to begin introducing the Circles approach within both schools.

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