The importance of an inclusive alumni network for ensuring effective transitions into employment and future destinations for people with learning disabilities

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Special edition: Education as a catalyst for the social inclusion of people with learning disabilities

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Widening Horizons: Supported internships as a vehicle for broadening and deepening the social inclusion of people with learning disabilities.

Accessible summary

A supported internship is a work placement for people with disabilities that includes spending some time at work and some time at school or college. It usually lasts for a year and people get extra support in the work placement.

We wanted to find out how a supported internship for people with learning disabilities helped them to feel like they belong in workplaces and society.

We found that the supported internship we studied did help people with learning disabilities to feel like they belong. The interns developed self-confidence, they were able to talk to people more easily and they learned that they were good at things. This was because the people they worked with saw them as individuals who were able to do helpful things. It was also because of the feedback they got at work and how they worked in different departments.

We think there should be more supported internships because they help people with learning disabilities to take the next step in life more confidently. Researchers need to find out more about how supported internships can help people to be socially included.

Abstract

Background: Obtaining employment for young people with learning disabilities remains challenging and they may not be able to experience work that offers them the opportunity for broader and deeper social inclusion. Supported internships (SIs) offer a possible solution to this problem, providing a bespoke, structured study programme designed for students with disabilities.

Methods: This paper explores, through an ecological systems approach, the experiences of three graduates, six interns, two job coaches and three colleagues, from a long running SI in a large private sector organisation that delivers utilities in the midlands. The organisation has many different departments and interns work in several of these, including the mailroom, reprographics, catering, health and safety, reception, and customer services. The researchers conducted small focus groups and interviews with the participants described above.

Findings: Thematic analysis identified three core phenomena of relevance to understanding the relationship between the SI programme and interns' experience of deepened and broadened social inclusion. The first theme illustrated positive changes to interns' and graduates' self-concept (e.g., self-determination) and participation, the second captured accounts of reciprocity in relationships, and the third contained insights into the SI practices that were relevant to improved social inclusion.

Conclusions: The SI did lead to the broadening and deepening of social inclusion for interns and graduates. The person-centred ethos of the SI, personalised approaches to workplace adaption, and feedback policies were practices that began

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to emerge as implicated in this impact. Positive developments to self-concept emerged as important in building interns' and graduates' capacities for participation. The study also demonstrated that an ecological systems approach is useful as a basis for conceptualising and investigating changes to the amount and quality of social inclusion, as experienced by people with learning disabilities.

Introduction

This paper explores the experiences of young people with learning disabilities taking part in supported internships (SIs) with a focus on the relationship between SIs and social inclusion.

Although educational outcomes may be improving for young people with learning disabilities, their employment outcomes fall below those of other young people (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018; WHO, 2011). The National Audit Office (2011) estimated that supporting people with a learning disability into employment improves their independence and self-esteem and increases that person's income by between 55 and 95 per cent. Nonetheless, young people with learning disabilities are twice as likely to not be in education, employment, or training (NEET) (ONS, 2015).

To make employment a realistic and expected outcome for individuals with learning disabilities, support needs to facilitate successful post-16 transitions. However, in England, advice has historically favoured Further Education (FE) routes and day services with a belief that more education and skill development is desirable as a preparation for the world of work, even though these young people achieve few qualifications and few jobs as a consequence (Beyer, Meek & Davies, 2014). These outcomes are problematic for young people with learning disabilities who do not

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experience work as a consequence. Work not only provides an income, but it also offers structure to people's lives, an opportunity for personal control and for skill development (e.g., Warr, 2002), and is inextricably linked with identity "*... the business of work is not simply to produce goods, but also to help produce people*" (Gini, 1990, p.707). Importantly, work is a significant arena for broader and deeper social inclusion and reciprocal social activity, facilitating the development of a valued social position.

Effective transition for young people with learning disabilities

Hanson et al. (2017) note that SIs are among the small number of programmes that do promote successful transition into employment for people with learning disabilities. This paper focuses on the specific educational practice of one SI known to be particularly successful. In England, SIs have become the predominant model for realising successful transitions into employment for young people with learning disabilities. They are specialised, employment-focused study programmes for young people aged 16-24, and although they can be based on different models, they typically follow a tripart structure of education, specialist job coaching and work experience (Department for Education, 2014). Typically, unpaid, SIs represent an educational practice that is designed to catalyse social inclusion for young people with learning disabilities through supporting their transition to employment.

In SIs, a job coach works with the young people to support them to learn from work placements and to make a positive progression into paid employment, regardless of the level of support required (DfE, 2014). Job coaches recognise when and how to provide support, and when to increase, decrease or remove it as the intern develops independence and other work and life skills (Hanson et al., 2017).

There have been several evaluations of SIs including work by CooperGibson (DfE, 2013) who evaluated the DfE's SI trial; Beyer, Kaehne, Meek, Pimm and Davies (2014) who evaluated the 'Real Opportunities' SI, and Purvis et al,. (2012) who evaluated 'Project SEARCH' in the USA. Sample sizes varied from 190 to over 1300 in these studies but their combined findings indicate that over a third of SI participants transitioned into full/part time paid employment after completing an SI. CooperGibson (DfE, 2013) found that a further 26% transitioned into voluntary work, 14% were progressing to further education or training and 25% were unemployed. Other outcomes associated with completing an SI include increased well-being and improved life and employability skills (e.g., Purvis et al., 2012). However, delivering an SI can be challenging. Co ordinating employers, education centres and job coaches to work together effectively requires skillful management. Further, misconceptions and apprehension by employers in respect of what n SI entails, and their ability to support young people with learning disabilities, are significant inhibiting factors for finding placements and indeed, post SI employment. It is possible that this could become an even greater limiting factor for post SI employment as the number of young people taking up SIs increases.

Nonetheless, the prominence of the SI model as a transition programme for young people with disabilities into employment, and its comparably favourable success rates, prompted the consideration of the extent to which the SI also facilitates social inclusion, and in what ways. Specifically, the paper seeks to:

1. Explore the extent to which young people with learning disabilities may experience deeper and broader social inclusion through the educational practice of SIs

2. Identify the practices of SIs that account for deeper and broader social inclusion.

Theoretical framework

As has been noted, earlier studies have evaluated the impact of SIs on positive destination post SI, and on wellbeing and employability skills. This study seeks to add to these data through analysis of changes to the quantity (breadth) and quality (depth) of social inclusion as it is experienced by young people with learning disabilities who are participating in a SI. The extent to which participation may be broadening *across* sites to include public domains and community participation and/or may be deepening *within* the structure of relationships in those sites is of interest to those who are seeking to evaluate the impact of policy and practice on social inclusion (Simplican et al., 2015). The paper draws on Simplican et al. (2015) to explain the core elements of our theoretical framework. It is argued that self-concept must be integrated into this framework, since it is a factor in building capabilities for participation and hence social inclusion. The paper begins with an explanation of how breadth of social inclusion can be conceptualised within an ecosystemic model.

Enriching social inclusion: breadth as an expansion of sites for participation.

In this paper, social inclusion is considered to have broadened when individuals can participate in an expanding range of social sites. An ecosystemic model is used to conceptualise breadth because it can illustrate how an individual's experience and development is influenced by the interaction of an *expanding* range of sites for participation (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). At the centre of this model sits those sites that are more private, including the intrapersonal space that lies within the mind and body

of the individual, and the spaces in which the individual participates in the social space of family and close friends. This expands into more public spaces for participation, such as the world of work. Within an ecosystemic model, these spaces would be defined as systems - the microsystem of body, self-concept, family, peers, caregivers, the mesosystem of school, work, and community, and the exosystem. The exosystem comprises the socio-political and cultural domains in which sites for participation, such as home and workplaces, are situated. The ecosystemic model is useful since it illustrates how advances in social inclusion can be understood in terms of participation across an expanding range of systems from the private to the public (Simplican et al., 2015).

The ecological systems model is also useful because it can illustrate how the enrichment of one system is implicated to the enrichment of other systems - that is, how it is also ecological in nature. For example, the individual's presence and display of competence in the workplace may inspire changes to workplace attitudes and culture which improve accessibility and in turn, enable greater participation in the mesosystem. Greater levels of participation are likely to impact positively on self-image and self-efficacy in the microsystem, such that an individual has increasing capacities for participation, across broadening systems. This is important for people with learning disabilities where the challenge is that 'each of the domains is so impoverished that the dynamic cycle never occurs' (Simplican et al., 2016, p29). It is also important in a study that is seeking to understand how an SI may be implicated in the social inclusion for interns and graduates. The paper now explains how *depth* of social inclusion is conceptualised within our framework.

Enriching social inclusion: depth as reciprocity in relationships

The conceptual framework recognises reciprocity as an indicator of depth in social inclusion. Reciprocal social activity is understood as the act of contributing to the wellbeing or productiveness of another human being, group, or organisation, whilst gaining similar benefits in return (e.g. Simplican et al, 2015). This is in the form of transactional dependence and contribution, a process that can be described more humanly as *mutual helpfulness*. The embodied nature of reciprocal social action is also recognised. Here, being reciprocal means finding a connection with another which is relevant to your own understanding of yourself (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). Other indicators of depth are the length, geographical spread, intensity, formality, and complexity of social relationships (Simplican et al., 2015). For example, where young people may experience prolonged, professional relationships with work colleagues who come to depend on them for their skills, the structure of the relationship can develop to include more formal, trusting, and reciprocal interactions. Where reciprocal relationships are in evidence in a system, such as a workplace, they may be evidence of deepening social inclusion since they stand for a deeper quality of relationship. Having considered depth and breadth as indicators of improved social inclusion, we now turn to how self-concept (as part of the microsystem), may be implicated in the development of capacities for inclusion across sites for participation.

Self-concept and social inclusion.

Our theoretical framework positions self-concept as part of an intrapersonal system within an ecological model of social inclusion. The framework posits that self-concept contributes to (or detracts from) capacities for participation to construct the breadth and depth of social participation among people with learning disabilities (Simplican et al., 2015; Harris and Orth, 2019). Self-concept here is conceived as a complex

amalgam of self-image (beliefs about the self, drawn from life experience and feedback from others), self-esteem (the extent to which the self-image is evaluated negatively or positively depending on a personal ideal) and self-determination (the extent to which an individual owns a locus of control) (Pestana, 2014). There is evidence that capability oriented self-concepts are associated with higher job satisfaction (Judge, et al., 2021) and long-term career success (Judge and Hurst, 2008). This is all with the recognition that self-concept is dynamic and influenced by other people, situations, and culture; for example, in feedback given by colleagues in the workplace (Purkey & Novak, 2009).

The theoretical framework is summarised in Figure 1 to show how the enlargement of social inclusion can be conceptualised the manifestation of a) *broadening* spaces for participation across systems, and b) *deepening* quality in the structure of relationships within those systems, and c) the growth of a positive self-concept as a *capacity for participation*.

<insert Figure 1>

This study seeks to explore the extent to which young people with learning disabilities can experience deeper and broader social inclusion through the educational practice of SIs, with reference to this theoretical framework.

Methodology

Approach and ethics

The study adopted a case study approach which 'involves the study of a case within a real-life, contemporary context or setting' (Cresswell, 2013, p.97); the case being a SI programme within an organisation in the UK (in its fifth year of operation at the

time of data collection). The organisation was selected firstly because of its longer history and success rate -100 interns have successfully completed the programme since it began and there is a 60% success rate of interns moving into employment after completion, providing an opportunity to identify what practices support social inclusion. An added pragmatic concern was that the SI is run entirely inhouse, rather than being split across a college and a workplace, which made meeting with the different participants easier. To fully understand the extent of the social inclusion and the mechanisms which had facilitated this, the research team recognised the need to look at the phenomena from the perspectives of a range of stakeholders which included current interns, graduates from the SI currently employed by the organisation, the job coaches, and a sample of colleagues of the interns and graduates.

The research sought the approval of an appropriate University Ethics Committee and thus included full participant briefing and consent. Accordingly, all the names used here are pseudonyms.

Participants and methods

The research included four different groups of participants: interns, graduates from the SI, job coaches and colleagues of the interns and graduates (see Table 1).

The qualitative methods adopted were focus groups and individual interviews using semi-structured interview schedules. Focus groups were conducted with the interns so they were around other people they knew and trusted - this was felt to be more conducive to open dialogue. The questions focused on the interns' reasons for doing the SI, their experiences of the internship, information about the departments they worked in and the people they worked with, the skills they had developed and what

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had changed about them and their lives since starting the internship. The job coaches were present for this focus group partly for safeguarding reasons, to facilitate the comfort of the interns and ensure the researchers and interns understood each other correctly. Whilst it is acknowledged that their presence introduced possible response bias on behalf of the interns, reviews of the transcripts suggested the impact of the coaches' presence was predominantly clarification of the questions being asked by the researcher and checking of the researcher's understanding of intern's responses.

<Insert table 1 about here>

A second focus group was conducted with the two job coaches using a semi-structured interview schedule. The purpose of this focus group was to help understand the elements of the SI programme and to further explore changes in the interns and graduates in relation to work and their general lives, as observed by the coaches.

Three graduates of the SI who had moved into paid employment at the organisation were interviewed using a semi-structured interview. The job coaches introduced each graduate to the research team. These graduates worked in different departments and felt more confident talking with the researcher so it was felt interviews could be conducted rather than focus groups with the job coaches present. Talking with graduates offered the research team the opportunity to look at longer term outcomes for young people with learning disabilities who take part in SIs and access their reflections on what helped them achieve those outcomes.

A final series of semi-structured interviews was run with employees from the organisation who worked with interns, graduates, or both. These three colleagues

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came from three different departments within the organisation and had been working with young people from the SI programme for a minimum of three years. Two of these employees were departmental supervisors and one was a colleague. Questions in these interviews centred around the employees' experiences of working with the interns and graduates, the skills, and capabilities these young people brought to their roles and brought another perspective on how the interns and graduates developed over time.

Data Analysis

The focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. Braun and Clark's (2012) six-stage approach to thematic analysis was adopted, to uncover the lived experiences of people within the SI and explore the factors central to the processes and phenomena at play (Braun, Clark, Hayfield & Terry, 2019). As Braun et al., (2019) suggest this approach is also particularly relevant when working with socially marginalised groups as it proffers a voice for them - young adults with learning disabilities might be described as such a group.

In the present study an inductive approach was adopted in the analysis of the transcribed focus group and interview data, because it was important to identify themes which were strongly linked to the data rather than using questions or hypotheses to drive the development of themes. Reflexive thematic analysis is not theory-agnostic however, even when inductive, and in this instance, it was grounded in the ecological systems approach, the theoretical framework explained earlier. (Simplican et al., 2015).

The first objective was to explore the extent to which young people with learning disabilities could experience deeper and broader social inclusion through the

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educational practice of SIs. The second was to understand which practices within the SI might account for social inclusion. Our findings are summarised in what follows.

Findings

Inductive, thematic reduction led to the identification of three major themes: Expanding horizons, reciprocity and mutual respect, and enrichment of social inclusion. The thematic structure of our findings is shown in Figure 2.

<insert figure 2 about here>

1. Expanding horizons: Positive self-concept and capacities for participation.

This theme captures participants' accounts of developments to their self-concept in the workplace in relation to self-confidence (socially), self-efficacy, and self-determination. The theme holds accounts of how feedback had been experienced by interns and graduates as a catalyst for the development of more capability-oriented self-concepts. In turn, a more positive self-concept seems to have enabled social activity in a broadening range of public sites for participation.

In relation to descriptions of themselves, when asked to share what had led to them being involved in the SI programme, interns tended not to use umbrella terms like learning disability or autism. They operated more descriptive accounts of their "difficulties". For example, *'difficulties with maths, English, science and literacy'*, *'learning quite slowly,' 'social difficulties'*, *'a mixture of difficulties.' 'Hearing difficulty,' 'reading and spelling'*, and in the case of one intern, *'English as a second language.'*

One intern, Callum, described his “difficulties” in specific terms to include descriptions of how he was developing his speech and language skills:

‘Mine would be speaking and reading and spelling. Every Thursday we have a therapist for speaking and language to help me to improve. For example, to help with the r's because I keep saying 'w'. I'm getting better at it”.

Tyrone, a graduate, did use the word autism to describe his “difficulties” but *‘hated the label and its stigma’* because of the way it had previously defined him as someone who had no future. For Tyrone, the internship was the beginning of a process of transformation, helping him to move his self-concept from *‘someone who wouldn’t amount to anything’* to an individual whose skills were of value, not only in the workplace but in the space of disability advocacy. Here, Tyrone is reflecting on his emergence as a role model who can be an advocate for learning disability, autism and supported internships. He comments on his need for role models and the impact this might have had on his confidence and self-esteem:

“I wasn't very confident in myself. I used to think of myself as the kind of stereotypical autistic kid who couldn't really amount to anything. Where I am from, at the time there wasn't really much support out there and there weren’t really any role models for example that I thought, you know what? They've surpassed their abilities - they've shown people that they can do things that people think they couldn't do. For me, I used to think there was something wrong with me and that I was just a problem.”

(Tyrone, graduate)

All graduates identified the SI and their experiences of paid employment in the same company, as catalysts for this change. Tyrone described this as follows:

'It was this programme that made me realise I could do things which I previously thought were beyond my ability.'

Interns reported changes that were not as transformational as this but were nonetheless important to them when reflecting on what had developed since their experience of the SI. They were more confident since starting the placement, particularly socially. For example, when asked to reflect on any changes to how they feel about themselves since the SI began, Callum described the changes in the following way:

'Back then I was sort of like ok. But I knew wanted to improve in a lot of things, but I was quite quiet until as it went on and I came here I've been able to speak to new people. Before I found it quite difficult to start conversations, but it has helped me tremendously with that.' *(Callum, intern)*

Graduates also described developments to their social confidence in both the professional and friendship sphere. For example, Colin (graduate), made the following comment when asked to reflect on making friends:

'Yeah, before I did have friends, but I was usually quite shy to talk with. But now since I have joined here and the internship, I have grown my talking skills and grown more confident into socialising with my peers but also my team as well'. (Colin, graduate)

Interns described the work activities that brought them most satisfaction and enjoyment when asked to reflect on this. They noted personal preferences such as *'jobs that keep me really busy'*, *'helping others', 'interacting with people'* and '*quality checking and restocking.'* The interns enjoyed doing a job well and this was often a

reflection of the fulfilment they gained from being of use to others. Similarly, the interns gave examples of their personal strengths such as being committed, being hardworking, being accurate and thorough, and not tiring when engaged in routine tasks. When asked to reflect on their individual strengths in the workplace, these often referred to things that colleagues had said. For example, Callum commented that, ‘I’ve been told I’m hard working,’ and Richard offered:

> *‘I think some of them have said that I am willing to learn, like I think they know I want to get it, but they say take your time a bit. They say I'm hard working, arrives on time, you know.’*

Graduates described their strengths in terms of the feedback they received from colleagues and managers, including *‘being chatty and able to do things independently’*.

Some interns described their difficulties with reference to how these arose and were self-managed in the workplace. These were accounts of developments to self-determination. James explained that *‘hearing difficulties’* made answering calls on reception challenging. James explained that, with support from his job coach, he had worked on communicating his emotions through facial expressions and tone of voice so that others (including colleagues and customers), were more able to interpret how he was feeling. He also came to understand that this was part of his professional responsibility in the workplace.

Within the data for the theme, *expanding horizons: self-concept and capacities for participation*, there were other accounts of how the SI placement had led to the development of self-determination for some of the interns. For example, Bal and James gave examples of their planned next step:

‘I've already applied for college courses’ (Bal, intern)

'I'd be interested in getting a full-time job somewhere and I'd commit to that. With a full time, job, I'd then be able to ... because I am already on the housing register, I'd be up for a place of my own and that's what I'd like to do. Live independently.' (James, intern)

However, most other interns were a little hesitant in defining their next step.

In relation to self-determination Tyrone (graduate) indicated how his experiences in the SI and paid employment had informed the choices he made about what to do next:

'Yeah, I have had that support here - my managers that I have had in the past and the support from the programme has helped me get where I have needed to. I guess I have carried on with my professional qualifications, went back to college to do my maths and English cos once I have finished my supported internship I thought, right, I need to do what I can to get better at things.' (Tyrone, graduate)

Charlotte (graduate) also remarked on her surprise at being offered an internship, describing some changes to her own self-estimation and how these were informed by achieving something she had never imagined as possible:

‘Yeah. I am very proud of myself. I was proud at the start when I got offered to do this. I just didn't think I would get a job at the end of it. Because I just didn't think I had that kind of like oomph to do it if you know what I mean?’ (Charlotte, graduate)

2. Reciprocity and mutual respect.

As summarised in the thematic structure (Figure 2), this theme illuminated the reciprocal benefits experienced by the colleagues who worked with interns in the SI. These included a combination of positive impacts on workplace ethos, job satisfaction, personal satisfaction, enjoyment, and personal development. In addition, the theme holds accounts of interns by colleagues where the former is described as invaluable contributors of skill and competence. The theme *expanding horizons: self-concept and capacities for participation* has already offered illustrations of how feedback from colleagues had informed interns' and graduates' self-concept, and how an experience of being useful had mattered to them. The theme, *reciprocity and social inclusion* offers illustrations of how the attitudes and approaches used by colleagues may be implicated in developments to positive self-concept for participants of the SI.

Interpersonal (self-concept) pathways to inclusion were demonstrated by colleagues who stressed the importance of acknowledging the individual as opposed to categorising them as 'disabled', 'special needs' or 'autistic' (Brisden, 1986). As Clare (the mailroom supervisor) explained, everybody, with and without a disability, *'has got their own personality*', putting someone at ease or otherwise, is not about whether 'someone has special educational needs' or not. The importance of knowing the individual as opposed to focussing on the label was further exemplified by David (reprographics supervisor) who had epilepsy:

'From my own personal experience, perhaps a lot of people just generalise so much - with me Hollywood has told them I'm sensitive to flickering lights, and a small amount of people are... but I find that with autism a lot of people make associations

with like Rain Man which is very extreme and that's completely rubbish for everyone else' (David, colleague in reprographics).

Focussing on their own understandings of each intern as a unique individual, colleagues frequently referred to the young people's likes and dislikes as well as their personal and work-related skills and attributes. For example, David in reprographics noticed that two interns had an 'encyclopaedic' knowledge of video games and football, and Clare in the mailroom spoke of the enjoyment everyone gained from watching short films that two of the interns put together. At an interpersonal level, colleagues express a genuine sense of enjoyment from working alongside the interns, this is often referred to as a reciprocal pleasure of sharing some 'banter.' Clare (supervisor, mailroom) comments on two interns that she and her colleagues are currently working with:

'I've seen when they are socialising, James and Bal they make little films together and they simulate sections out of mainstream films and they're proper little director! And they're funny aren't they Ralph'? … (Clare, supervisor, mailroom)

In this way, colleagues positioned interns as socially central rather than socially segregated in their departments.

Expressions of mutual respect were also offered as indications of reciprocity. Colleagues report on how they have learned to see interns as capable individuals who made an important contribution to the work that needs to be done. Interns were recognised for bringing new skills that also helped their colleagues to develop and improve. For example, when asked to reflect on a comment he had made about low confidence rather than ability being a factor in interns' participation, Clare (supervisor, mailroom) talked about one of her interns in the following way:

‘Well, for James – it's about more self-confidence in his tasks and once again Jason has shown me some PC training - he has shown me quite a few short cuts. So, his skills there are far greater than mine. Building relations - he works well with his team - he is very polite and helpful. And he is very polite and helpful. (Clare, supervisor, mailroom).

Interns are seen as vital resources and comrades. One colleague (David, colleague in reprographics) had no doubts or negative reflections and *‘just praise actually. How much of a great job they do’* Interns are also viewed by their colleagues not as vulnerable or incapable but as *‘savvy’* (Clare, supervisor, mailroom) as *‘unbelievably quick’* (Stephanie, female colleague) and capable, with support, of learning the difference between the ‘casual’ banter that happens in the workspace and the more polite register of the customer facing workspace. Colleagues reported that they had moved from seeing interns as potential burdens or restrictors on their freedom, to seeing them as central and indispensable members of the staff team.

3. Enrichment of social inclusion for interns: relevant practices

The second objective of this study was to identify the practices and processes within the SI that facilitated inclusion which the third theme extracted from the data addresses (see Figure 2). The data in this theme casts light on how the SI may have been broadening and deepening social inclusion; the relevant practices and processed emerged from this theme as; personalisation and person-centredness; high performance policies and practices; peer mentoring and rotation through multiple departments.

Personalisation and person centredness refer to “*a standing or status that is bestowed upon one human being by others, in the context of relationship and social*

*being. It implies recognition, respect and trus*t" (Kitwood, 1997, p.8). The theme, *reciprocity and social inclusion* has already illustrated how colleagues gained reciprocally from working with interns and saw them as capable, integrated members of the team. As was noted, colleagues valued the interns and operated in a culture of mutual respect:

"I think when they finish their internship, we realise how much we miss them in all the areas because they're doing important jobs." (Clare, supervisor, mailroom)

However, the theme, *enrichment of social inclusion for interns: relevant practices* contain data which elucidates what job coaches, colleagues and the organisation did to enrich social inclusion through, for example, personalised practice.

Firstly, colleagues and job coaches, had learned to work actively to repress stereotypes in favour of personalised thinking. For example, Linsey notes the following.

"The thing that stuck with me most was you can meet a person with autism, but you've only met one person. Because every single person - the spectrum is so large ... no two people are the same". (Linsey, colleague)

Since this theme focusses on practice, this is illuminating since it was clear that looking beyond the label was an important technique for diminishing personal anxieties among colleagues about how interns could be included in successful professional relationships.

Examples of how personalisation was practised in making adaptions to the workplace emerged in this theme. For example, a colleague from Land and Acquisitions (Stephanie) talks of the importance of learning to interpret behaviour in

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a personalised way. She describes how the team had learned to avoid the word *‘nice’* when striking up conversations with one graduate since *‘nice’* to her meant *‘really, really special.’* The consequence was that the question *‘Did you have a ‘nice’ weekend’* was met with the response, *‘no not really.’* However, the question, ‘what was your weekend like?’ elicited more reciprocal and extended interaction.

On the theme of personalisation and person-centredness, finding and emphasising interns’ personal strengths and capacities was also a practice that was described by job coaches as an important strategy for success, including telling interns’ families about their skills, abilities, and achievements. The job coach role emerged as an important strategy for supporting colleagues to prepare for new interns, work effectively with interns and mediate relationships between the workplace and home.

Appearing from the data in this theme, was a second key approach which was concerned with policies and practices designed to foster high performance. Feedback was both formal and informal and came from the job coaches and their colleagues. A policy of regular feedback was part of the organisation’s mainstream policy, and this culture was extended to the SI. One job coach reported, *“The managers say they need ten people like James”* and “*I've never had any negative feedback*” *(Alison, job coach).* Though the focus was on specific, positive feedback, high expectations also prevailed, a relevant practice we return to later.

The focus on contribution and capability, along with the feedback systems, appeared to be strongly related to increased confidence, and for the graduates the development of a wide range of employability, career, and technical skills. When graduates from the SI were asked to describe how they had changed because of

completing the SI they were able to describe aspects of personal effectiveness and different employability skills they now possessed:

'More confident. Very much hard working. Good team player.' (Colin, graduate)

'Communication skills. I've learned how to have a proper CV… report writing, there's other stuff like Microsoft office - those sorts of skills you need to make those presentations, excel spreadsheets' (Tyrone, graduate)

The feedback strategies used in the SI emerged from the data as relevant practices for social inclusion. In the data for this theme, we saw that the workplace policy for giving very specific feedback on specific skills, helped interns to understand their unique contribution and the way their contribution was of value:

'... They consider me as someone who is quite analytical, more fact based. Trustworthy because if they tell me to get something done, I can get it done. Quite knowledgeable. Just recently carried on with my professional qualifications. I've carried on working as to how I can become a better health & safety professional.' (Tyrone, graduate)

The interns and graduates responded positively to having high expectations of their work – being treated like an adult, having to practice new behaviours, and recognising there were consequences to not performing as required contributed to their development, their sense of importance and motivated them.

'I contribute a lot of well, the work I do is very much essential to the team and it's more of a need to be done or the project will have to be put back and back, even further delayed, so I think the work I do is absolutely essential to the team.' (Colin, graduate)

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'I feel more enthusiastic in my work as well.' (Colin, graduate)

The data for this theme illustrates how specific programme practices such as cyclic feedback and high expectations have a relationship with the findings reported in the theme, *expanding horizons: Self-concept and capacities for participation* because they demonstrate how feedback systems were implicated in the growth of a more positive self-concept and how person-centred approaches were practical tools for learning how to include interns and enhance their job performance.

Discussion

The first objective for this study was to explore the extent to which young people with learning disabilities may experience deeper and broader social inclusion through the educational practice of SIs. Our theoretical framework proposed that growth in a positive self-concept was a manifestation of enhancements to social inclusion, as well as a factor in it. It also posited that the growth of social inclusion could be identified when individuals were participating in an expanding range of sites (from interpersonal to social political for example – see Figure 1), and by the deepening of the quality of their relationships within those sites (e.g., in the extent to which they were reciprocal).

Here, self-concept is assumed to have an impact on capacities for participation since these determine how readily an individual will engage in a broadening range of public sites, including workplaces and communities. There is evidence that these domains reinforce one another in a positive feedback loop through the lifespan (Harris and Orth, 2019) and we also found that interns and graduates did develop positive changes to their self-concept, and that this was implicated in the expansion of their participation. For example, in their social confidence and their ability to

socialise with friends (microsystem), and with colleagues and customers in the workplace (mesosystem).

For interns and graduates, the expansion of their positive self-concept seems to have arisen from being able to meet the high expectations held and the feedback they experienced in the work environment in relation to their performance. In turn this seems to have catalysed the development of a stronger, broader self-efficacy and a capability-oriented self-concept. For many interns, this led to positive and sometimes transformational changes to self-esteem. For example, the SI had disrupted one graduate's (Tyrone) negative self-image quite profoundly, moving it toward a capability orientation and away from a belief that he would *'never amount to anything'.* The SI enabled the interns and graduates to enact their capabilities in ways that helped them see themselves as competent social actors who had specific preferences and abilities (Purkey & Novak, 2009). For Charlotte, the SI, and her success in gaining a job at the organisation, made her proud of herself and challenged her view of what was possible in her life. We interpret these as manifestations of capability-oriented self-concepts.

In relation to self-determination, which here is defined as the degree to which an individual situates a local of control within themselves (Pestana, 2014), the findings demonstrated how the experience of the SI placement had helped interns to understand their "difficulties" and how these could be managed practically in professional life. They were taking responsibility for communicating their needs such that a good job could be done. This may be a sign of expanding self-awareness and self-determination, as interns were learning to understand their disability in a social context through transactional encounters that would help them, their colleagues and their customers to achieve desired outcomes (Pestana, 2014). The capacity and

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desire to manage this independently can enable an experience of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the workplace (mesosystem), which in turn enhances confidence and motivation at the microsystem, intrapersonal level (Forner, Jones, Berry & Eidenfalk, 2020). This tends to highlight the importance of the experience of authentic work and workplaces in the development of intrapersonal capacities for social inclusion.

For Tyrone (graduate) his participative activity had extended into community and socio-political sites, and he explained how changes to his self-esteem within the workplace (intrapersonal, mesosystemic) had catalysed activism and advocacy (exosystemic). This is an illustration of how self-concept may determine participation in the expanding sites for participation made accessible by the SI. For other interns and graduates, the changes were not as transformative as in the case of Tyrone, but the data demonstrated some interaction between self-concept and the expansion of social inclusion. Of course, one of the limitations of this study is that it is small scale and though we have seen a relationship between the SI, growth of positive self-concept and the expansion of horizons in the participants' own stories, the strength and modus of this relationship will require further investigation, not least so that the factors involved in catalysing social inclusion in an SI can be better understood.

The second objective of this study was to Identify the practices of SIs that account for deeper and broader social inclusion. Our findings indicate that attitudes were important dimensions to practice, for interns' and graduates' experiences of reciprocity or mutual helpfulness seem to have emerged from the way they were valued and understood by their colleagues.

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The colleagues’ and job coaches’ appreciation of the interns as unique individuals who had things in common with themselves aligns with Norwich and Lewis’ (2007) pedagogical construction of the ‘unique difference perspective’, which stresses that all students have both unique learning needs and needs which are common to all learners. This position contrasts with the “general difference position” (Norwich & Lewis, 2007) which encompasses both unique and common learner needs whilst also emphasising the need for a ‘special pedagogy’ relevant to a ‘specific group’. A SI programme which adopted a ‘general differences position’ would therefore treat interns as different from others, and thus in need of a separate environment to those without learning disabilities. The presence of the “unique differences” position (Norwich & Lewis, 2007) in the ‘interpersonal’ relationships established between colleagues and interns points therefore to the broader, deeper ‘organisational’ (Simplican et al., 2015) elements of the SI programme which embed, promote, and sustain social inclusion. For example, the commitment of the organisation to employment of job coaches to facilitate the running of the SI programme illustrates the attitudes of senior staff in the organisation who initiated, established, and approved the programme.

This form of embodied reciprocity (Merleau-Ponty, 1945) (i.e., developing a connection with another through your own understanding of yourself) facilitates broader” interpersonal” social inclusion (Simplican et al, 2015); and when found broadly amongst colleagues from different departments points to factors associated with social inclusion in the organisational site of participation (Simplican et al, 2015). There was a transactional flow of social reciprocity between colleagues and interns' which contrasts with research presented by Kimura, Fujioka, Jung, Fujisawa,

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Tomoda & Kosaka (2020) which highlights the challenges people with learning disabilities experience in the social arena.

In relation to other relevant practices, person centredness and personalisation emerged as important *practical strategies* for working effectively with interns. SIs are inherently person-centred, being as they are highly individualised programmes that involve individually tailored support and placements chosen to fit with the interns' interests and skill sets. In a direct move away from a deficit model with a focus on impairments, and educational contexts where young people with learning disabilities do not have responsibilities, the SI promoted responsibility and engagement with feedback systems which identified strengths, successes, and areas for development. and areas for development.

As was found in the evaluation of the DfE pilot SI programme (DfE,2013) having high expectations of the interns was found to be an important practice for realising successful outcomes such as skill development, increased confidence, and the development of identity. Feedback systems and rotation around different departments facilitated movement into a greater number of spaces and interactions with a wider range of people. When identity and social interactions develop, it does indeed seem that interns were more able to expand their presence and influence in social spaces. The interns' experience of reciprocal connection extended to a wider range of people, organisations, and communities, (breadth of social inclusion). Relationships within these varied departments also developed into sustained, more trusting, and increasingly reciprocal relationships (depth of social inclusion) (Giesbers et al., 2020).

There were limitations to this study, most notably the small number of colleagues, interns and graduates that were interviewed and the time spent by researchers at the site of the SI. Drawing on an ecosystemic model (Simplican, 2015), it is argued for, and to some extent demonstrated a) expansions to depth and breadth of social inclusion for participants of the SI b) positive self-concept as a capacity for social inclusion. The paper also discussed the SI ethos and practice that emerged as relevant to the outcomes. However, there is a need to illustrate these phenomena and their relationship more richly through prolonged engagement with participants in the SI space so that our conclusions (as summarised below) can be further tested, illustrated and/or explained.

Conclusion

The SI studied did result in the broadening and deepening of social inclusion for the interns and graduates who took part in this research. Drawing on participants' accounts, it is demonstrated that interns developed a more positive self-concept because of the SI, to include shifts in self-esteem, self-determination and a move towards a capacity-orientation. Interns and graduates also gave examples of how their confidence *within* and *across* sites for participation had developed. The size of these shifts did vary across participants but were discernible for all. Data appearing from interviews with the SI colleagues who supported interns cast some light on how these self-concept changes had taken place since there was evidence of reciprocal valuing. Colleagues learned to see interns as capable and indispensable members of their team and reported the benefits that the interns had brought, for example in the fun and new skills that interns brought to the workplace, and in improvements to work satisfaction. The authentic appreciation of interns as colleagues whose work and social-company was valued and where interns brought reciprocal benefits to the

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workplace, situated the SI programme in a discernibly different paradigm to that of a school-based education. The chiastic nature of the SI programme as both educational endeavour and authentic workplace speaks to a genuinely reciprocal social activity. We conclude that the inherent perspectives and ethos of the SI (unique differences, person-centred) was fundamental to its efficacy in developing social inclusion.

The SI had also equipped interns and graduates with career, employability and technical skills by systematic instruction, feedback, accountability, and high expectations. These practices were implicated in the growth of positive self-concept and the related expansion of participation and note that more research is needed to explain the relationship between such practices and outcomes.

Finally, the ecological, ecosystemic model of social inclusion proposed by Simplican et al. (2015) offers a powerful framework for finding and evaluating growth in social inclusion, particularly when positive self-concept is integrated as a capacity for expanding the horizons of people with learning disabilities.

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