**Circle of Friends Masters Dissertation**

**I recently completed a Masters Dissertation with the aim of establishing the impact of Circle of Friends on the self-esteem and social inclusion of a boy in primary school who had dyslexia.**

**The focus child, whom I called Peter for the purposes of this research, was a ten year old whose difficulties with writing and spelling appeared to be having an impact on his self esteem and on his interactions with his peers. Interviews were conducted with his mother, his teacher and with Peter himself; there was a whole class discussion based on the Circles of Relationships worksheet in the Circle of Friends programme, and a sociometric survey was conducted in the class. The findings indicated that Peter was very aware of his difficulties with class work and that he was somewhat isolated in the yard at play-time. He attempted to play with others but there seemed to be fights and arguments every day and he was always involved in them. He felt he had no one to call a friend, someone who would stick up for him when he needed it.**

**Based on the results of the sociometric survey, five boys who volunteered were chosen to be part of the Circle of Friends group with Peter, which would meet for the next six weeks. There was great excitement and enthusiasm from the other boys at the first meeting, although Peter was quiet and a bit wary at first. By the third week a change was very evident in Peter’s interactions with the group; he was much more vocal and participative. The class teacher also began to notice a change in the dynamic of the groups who played together at break-times and she found that there were far fewer reports of fights in the yard. At the end of the six weeks Peter and another boy had become friends and Peter felt that he now had an advocate. However, at the follow-up interview he said that he still did not feel part of the groups in the class and that he was being left out of teams. The results from the follow up interviews with the mum and teacher were more positive; the teacher was delighted with the new-found harmony in the yard and his mum reported that Peter seemed to be much happier.**

**A whole class discussion and sociometric survey were conducted six months after the original one to see if the changes in the class dynamic had been maintained and if Peter still had the same friend. There was a noticeable difference in Peter’s demeanour at this meeting, indicating an increase in his confidence and self-esteem; at the first meeting he made no contributions at all, whereas at the second meeting he made two, saying that he thought the Circle of Friends was good and that he was still “best friends” with the boy he became friendly with during the programme. The findings from the sociometric survey indicated that Peter was now more widely accepted by the class group and that he had a best friend in the class. All of the children said that there weren’t as many fights and that people played with different children now.**

**The findings from this research indicate that the Circle of Friends programme is a worthwhile intervention for children who may be experiencing self-esteem issues or who are having problems with peer interaction. It does require an interest in and a commitment to the programme and consistency in holding the meetings is vital. However, the advantage of being a teacher in the school over someone who just comes into the school to conduct the programme is that the teacher is there to monitor the progress and make changes if necessary, as was the case in the first week of this programme. It was also very satisfying to observe how participation in the programme had such a positive impact on this child and indeed on the whole class, and I am happy to report that two years later, Peter still has is best friend and is still presenting as happy and included in his class group.**

**Joanne McLaughlin**

**Woodland National School,**

**Letterkenny,**

**Co. Donegal**

**Ireland**

**cjmclaughlin@vodafone.ie**