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Research Associate Summary Report

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Children's voice, children's rights

What children with special needs have to say about their
variously inclusive schools

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Introduction

Children have a right to be heard and this is enshrined in various pieces of recent legislation such as the Children Act 1989 and Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003), but as school leaders how do we ensure that this happens? This is a particular issue with our more 'difficult-to-reach' pupils. It cannot merely be assumed that just because the school has a school council and carries out annual pupil questionnaires that all pupils' voices have an influence on policy in the school and the wider educational system.

Although recent research has explored the theme of listening to the views of children in inclusive educational service development and there are many examples of gaining and representing children's views, there are fewer published examples of these views actually influencing practice.

In the present research study, the aim was to find authentic ways of seeking the views of primary-aged children with learning difficulties about their variously inclusive school placements. The views, even of such young children with significant needs, gave some important indications of how inclusive practices can be both challenging and supporting in the eyes of those who are experiencing them. It is hoped that such expressed pupil views will inform and develop the ways in which all schools seek to ascertain and act upon the voices of the children in their care.

Method

The research sought the views of six primary-aged pupils from three different schools, who had been identified as having severe learning difficulties. The children attended either a special school, an enhanced resource mainstream primary or a mainstream primary with one-to-one teaching assistant support. The children were each interviewed to seek their views on what they liked and disliked about school, who their friends were, who helped them at school and what they wanted to do in the future. Following the interview, the children were asked to participate in a diamond ranking exercise. Finally, the children were given a disposable camera and asked to move around school and take photos of places and things that they liked and disliked.

Findings about the methods

The interviews were an effective method of gathering the children's views, despite some of the participants being limited to one-word utterances. The interviews needed to be carefully structured and supported using a puppet and symbol cue cards. The diamond ranking exercise, which involved each child's likes and dislikes being written on Post-it notes and ranked in order was also accessible to all the children even those with the most limited communicative ability. However, the most successful method for those with limited verbal abilities was taking photographs. The child with the least verbal abilities expressed more ideas using the photos whereas the child with the greatest verbal abilities expressed more ideas using the interview and diamond ranking exercise. Only 42 per cent of responses were mentioned by the children in more than one medium. Therefore, as children have different preferences and abilities, if a more complete picture is to be built up, it is important to use a variety of media to gain pupils' view.

What the children said

These comparisons must be viewed in the context of the small number of children in the study. Nevertheless, some interesting patterns of response regarding feelings, friends and futures, did emerge.

Feelings

Positive feelings

The general conclusion from the children about their variously inclusive school placements is that their experiences are overwhelmingly positive. When asked what they like doing at school, the children mentioned a wide variety of activities. They particularly liked numeracy activities, creative activities, playground games (including football), playing with friends and computers.

Negative feelings

When asked what it was at school that the children did not like, there were far fewer responses. This could be because the children are genuinely happy at school and found it difficult to come up with any aspects of school life that they did not like. Another point of view however could be that it was more difficult for the children to express negative views. The children who did give full answers about what they didn't like talked about relationships rather than subjects or activities. For example, one child from the enhanced resource school did not like being told off, a child from a mainstream school did not like being called names at school and a child from a special school did not like being hit by another pupil.

Patterns of response

There are some interesting tentative patterns that seemed to emerge when comparing what the children said they liked or disliked. The two children at mainstream school did not mention any academic activities when asked what they liked at school and yet all the other children mentioned these activities. The children in a mainstream school were much more interested in the social aspects of school in the playground and with sport and PE. This suggests that there may be a spectrum of perceived importance depending on the type of school attended, with the social side of school life being more important to the children in mainstream school and the academic side being more important to the child in special school, with the children in an enhanced resource school enjoying both aspects.

Friends

The children's talk of their friends painted a very positive picture that gave no indication of isolation of any of the children in any of the different settings. It was an interesting and unexpected finding that when asked who they worked with and gained help from at school, the majority of children identified peers rather than support staff. There was no particular pattern with reference to the type of provision attended. Staff were only mentioned by half the children in the interviews and activities and as these children only mentioned them once, it seems that support from their peers was far more important to pupils than support from staff.

Futures

The children were less concerned about the future than their parents who had expressed major concerns in this area through their interviews. The children's interests very much seemed to be in the present although that had not stopped them reflecting on what job they would like to do as an adult.

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated the importance of using a variety of methods to elicit pupil opinions as different children will respond to different opportunities. It is a vital part of the school self-assessment process to consider marginalised groups within the school, and so opinions of these groups of pupils need to be sought and a more creative approach may well be needed to ascertain what their views are.

In terms of happiness and quality of relationships, there was much uniformity of opinion among the children in the three different types of school placement. The research did however indicate that the children in mainstream school found the social side of school more important, whereas in special school it was the academic side, and those in an enhanced resource school setting seemed to find the balance between the two.

For the children in this study, the very few aspects of school that were disliked involved relationships, meaning we need to reflect on the quality of relationships that children have with staff and peers. The children mentioned positively the help that peers gave them at school. This may well signal a need to consider an increase in peer mentoring and children working in collaborative groups at school.

From the results of this research, it does not seem that children find adults all that important with regard to their enjoyment of school. Perhaps we, as adults, ought to listen more to the voices of children when we are trying to get it right for them.

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References

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