

www.ncsl.org.uk

Inspiring leaders;
improving children's lives

Research Associate Report

Helen Bishton, Director Corley Centre

Children's voice, children's rights

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

Summer 2007

Contents

<u>Introduction</u>	3
<u>Literature review</u>	4
<u>Methodology</u>	6
<u>What the children said</u>	10
<u>Implications for the leadership of inclusive schools</u>	15
<u>Conclusion</u>	16
<u>References</u>	18
<u>Acknowledgments</u>	20

Introduction

Children have a right to be heard and this is enshrined in various pieces of recent legislation, but as school leaders how do we ensure that this happens in practice? This is a particular issue with our more 'difficult to reach' pupils who have limited communicative ability, which may be due to age, disaffection or learning disability. 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 wider education system.

Pupil voice is a vital part of school self-assessment but all pupils need to have their views heard if a true picture is going to be built up by school leaders. In this research the aim was to find authentic ways of seeking the views of primary-age children with learning difficulties about their variously inclusive school placements. The views, even of such young children with significant needs, give some important indications of how inclusive practices can be challenged and supported in the eyes of those who are experiencing them. The experiences of children can be explored through direct observation, interviews with significant adults in the child's life and analysis of educational documents, but the most important way of seeking to understand the experiences of children is to seek their views directly.

... those that really experience inclusive or exclusive practices are the children. Consequently, don't they have the right to be heard? (Messiou 2002: 117)

The research questions that this study aimed to answer were:

- What did the case study children like about school?
- What did the case study children dislike about school?
- Who were the important people to the children at school?
- What were the children's thoughts about the future?
- How could the children be enabled to express these views?

Literature review

It is only relatively recently that children's views have been seen as important. Historically their views have often been deemed unimportant and unreliable. As Mills notes:

The neglect of children's perspectives in social sciences has come about as a result of particular social constructions that estimated them as incapable of producing relevant, reliable or representative evidence. (Mills 2004: 31)

Other commentators have questioned the degree to which research can effectively influence children's lives if it authentically considers their perspective (Masson 2000).

Legislation increasingly requires children's views to be sought and acted on, for example:

- *Valuing People* (DH 2001)
- *Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Pupils with Special Educational Needs* (DfES 2001)
- *The Education Act 2002* (DfES 2002)
- *Code of Practice for Schools: Disability Discrimination Act 1995: Part 4* (DRC 2002)
- *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003)

All of the legislation above has its roots in two important documents that were published almost 20 years ago. Article 12 of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) gave children the rights of participation, and the UK 1989 Children Act further enshrined this (DH 1989).

There are various different examples about how children's right to participation has been translated into concrete action in schools. For instance, sites such as the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning site (www.consultingpupils.co.uk) provide considerable support to teachers and school leaders in developing tools to listen to children's views. The school self-evaluation process required by Ofsted (2005) emphasises the importance of this aspect of a school's work.

Local authorities have also been carrying out work to inform their policy and practice by consulting with children. For instance, Coventry Education Authority used a national organisation called Young Voice to consult children on their new inclusion strategy (Brook et al 2005). Warwickshire County Council and the Warwickshire primary care trusts (PCTs) commissioned work to seek the views of disabled young people on their proposals to integrate services for disabled young people in the area (Harrison et al 2004). The SEN (Special Educational Needs) regional partnerships have also given resources to develop this area of work (DfES 2004). The recent report from the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee on SEN considered the findings of the Participation in Education project at the University of Bristol and called on the government 'to increase the role of children and young people in reviewing, planning and designing services' (2006: 36). In their reply the government stated:

The Government is committed to designing policies and services around the needs of children and young people, and we agree that an ongoing dialogue with children and young people is essential to ensuring that policies and services that we develop meet the needs of those they are designed to support. (Her Majesty's Government 2006: 73)

Recent research has also displayed a greater focus on listening to the views of children in inclusive educational service development. This includes developing a charter for inclusion (Jones 2005), evaluating an inclusion centre (Preece and Timmins 2004) or exploring marginalisation in a mainstream primary school (Messiou 2002). However, views on the degree to which these consultations lead to action are mixed, and some researchers have observed that, while there are many examples of projects gaining and representing children's views, there are fewer of these views actually influencing practice (Lewis 2001; Cavet and Sloper 2004). As May notes:

Ultimately the publications empower practitioners to ascertain, manage and represent pupils' voice, rather than encouraging practitioners to empower the pupils themselves. (May 2005: 30)

Methodology

Advice for the research methods used in this study was drawn heavily from Lewis et al (2005). This report for the Disability Rights Commission studied in great detail several different methods of gaining the views of disabled children that were further tested on this research sample.

Sample

This study formed part of a larger research project, based around case studies of nine pupils with severe learning difficulties who attend schools that are organised in three different ways. Three children (Jessica, Lucy and Anne) attended a primary special school designated for children with severe learning difficulties (School A), three children (Sarah, Paul and Emily) attended a mainstream primary school that had enhanced resources to provide eight places throughout the school for pupils with severe learning difficulties (School B), and two children (Adam and Steven) attended their local mainstream schools (School C and D) with the support of a learning support assistant (LSA). School A covered a mixed catchment area across part of a large city in the Midlands, School B covered a suburban catchment area in Northern England and Schools C and D were in one local education authority (LEA) in the Midlands. School C was in a rural setting and School D in a small town setting. Jessica, who attended School A, also attended a local mainstream school for one-and-a-half days a week. All pupils are referred to by pseudonyms throughout this report.

The pupils covered a spread of ages from Year 1 to Year 6 (ages 6–11). There were five girls and four boys. Their LEA described all the children as having severe learning difficulties but this is a relative term and covers quite a range of different needs. Sarah also had physical disabilities.

Gaining access to the children relied on parents and the school giving consent after the research had been fully explained. The researcher also checked ongoing assent with the pupils. This involved checking with the children regularly that they still wanted to take part in the research activities, telling them they could withdraw at any time and picking up on any non-verbal cues of discomfort or unhappiness. As part of giving consent/assent the participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity in any written reports. If the children had disclosed anything of a child protection nature to the researcher then this would have had to be passed on to the relevant authorities, but this was not the case. The research activities needed to take place in an authentic environment for the child; since all the views sought were about school all the activities for this research took place in the school environment. The researcher had visited the children on a once-termly basis over the previous two years so the children were familiar with her. In all cases the researcher saw the child in a small room in their own school with the door open onto a school corridor with passers by. In the majority of cases the researcher saw the child on their own but on two occasions the teacher thought it better that an LSA accompanied the child to help the researcher to understand the child's unclear communication. The LSA only provided clarification when asked and otherwise sat quietly in the corner.

Approach adopted

The interviewer sought the children's 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 on from the interview the children were asked to participate in a 'diamond ranking game'. Finally the children were given a disposable

camera and asked to move around the school and take photographs of places and things that they liked and disliked.

The interviews were supported by a puppet called Bobby, through which all the interview questions and interaction were passed. Bobby was very popular with five of the six children – Emily seemed scared of him and Bobby was put away for the interview. It was almost as if the children believed Bobby was real despite the fact that they were shown he was a puppet and were allowed to play with him. The children asked Bobby direct questions and even gave him advice on how to deal with certain situations. The interviewer was concerned that Bobby talking about his likes and dislikes at school might lead the children to copy his responses. There are only a limited amount of activities that pupils engage in at school and the interviewer purposely chose common activities for Bobby to like and dislike. An analysis of the children's and Bobby's answers showed that it is reasonable to suggest that there was not any autosuggestion from using Bobby the puppet.

The interviews were taped. The children were given a chance to play with the puppet and recording their voice on the tape recorder before the interview began. The interviews were also supported by using symbol cue cards to aid the child's understanding of the spoken content of the interviews. They provided an extra permanent reminder of what the interview was focusing on at that moment in time. Words are said and then may be lost and forgotten but symbols can be constantly referred to, to remind the child of the topic of conversation (Detheridge 2000).

The symbols were those taken from the Widgit software package that is used extensively with special needs students in England. Five of the six children spontaneously recognised the symbols without any explanation from Bobby.

After the interview with the puppet each child was asked to take part in a 'diamond ranking game'. This involved the child telling the researcher what they liked and disliked about school and the researcher writing each thing down on a separate post-it note. The researcher then asked the child to pick out the thing they liked best and this was placed on the table as the top of the diamond; then the child picked out the thing they disliked most and this was placed at the bottom of the diamond; graded responses were then placed in between according to the child's views and a diamond shape was produced.

The final part of the research process with the children was taking photographs. The children were told they were not allowed to take photographs of people due to ethical and child protection considerations. While they were taking the photographs the interviewer asked the child to indicate whether the object they were taking a photograph of was liked or disliked and the interviewer made field notes of any other explanation the children gave of the photographs they were taking.

Findings about the methods used

The methods that were used to elicit answers from the children were extremely important. These were children who had limited communication abilities, were still in primary school and had severe learning difficulties. These factors presented significant challenges.

Two participants in the case study research had profound learning difficulties and had no verbal abilities; they were unable to conceptually express their views about events that were not concrete and happening at that time. Both these girls attended School A and were unable to express their like or dislike of an activity by recognising it in a photograph and then using non-verbal means (facial expression or symbols) to convey their feelings. They could express their like of some activities with facial

expressions or gestures when they were actually experiencing an activity and therefore adults very close to the child could say which activities they liked and disliked. The researcher wanted to access the views of the children directly from themselves and use a similar research method with all the children to aid reliability of comparisons. Therefore it was decided, after much deliberation, that these two girls would not participate in the research. Excluding these girls meant that the views of pupils with the most profound learning difficulties were not reflected in this research. However, with such limited communicative abilities the views of such pupils can only be interpreted by those closest to them.

While some of the other children who did successfully participate in the research were limited to one-word utterances for their communication, they still successfully managed to get their message across with the range of tools that were presented to them.

Interviews were still used as the basis for the first part of gathering the children's views, despite some of the participants being limited to one-word utterances. The interviews were, however, carefully structured and supported. They were carried out in an informal manner encouraging the children to take the lead. Bobby, the puppet, shared his own views in order to encourage the children to share theirs too. As Lewis notes:

Children may more readily perceive the soft toy as asking a genuine question whereas the sincerity of the adult questioner may be perceived as false. (Lewis 2004: 4)

The researcher particularly wanted to use a puppet in order to help interviews flow without the necessity of asking direct questions of the children. As Dockrell notes:

A range of work has suggested that making a statement to a child tends to elicit a fuller response than does asking a question. (Dockrell et al 2000: 55)

Any questions that were used needed to be open-ended and the researcher needed to guard against leading the children, as it has been found that children in these circumstances will tend to agree with what they think you want to hear (Lewis 2002). Sarah, who had the longest mean length of utterance (12.1 words), and Steven (length of utterance: 9.7 words) gave the majority of their answers without a direct question from the interviewer. Adam (length of utterance: 1.9 words) and Emily (length of utterance: 1 word) required direct questions to elicit all their responses. Paul (length of utterance: 8.8 words) and Jessica (length of utterance: 3.6 words) did volunteer a couple of responses in reply to Bobby's statements but the majority of answers were as a result of direct questions. These findings could be viewed in two ways. Either children who were able to give longer answers and therefore were more verbally able are more likely to give answers without direct questions, or children who gave answers without direct questions are likely to use longer utterances.

The children liked the 'diamond ranking game' and quickly grasped the concept. In fact one child who was limited to one-word utterances built up a pyramid shape as there was not anything he disliked, an opinion he had also expressed through the interview. With older and more able young people this 'game' could be used to elicit opinions with very little staff time. Pupils themselves could be given a pack of post-it notes after having had the game explained to them. The diamond could be arranged on a piece of paper and then handed in for staff to analyse at their leisure. The diamond ranking could also be used as a group discussion activity to encourage negotiation of opinions and compromise.

This research found that the child with the least verbal abilities expressed more ideas using the photographs whereas the child with the greatest verbal abilities expressed

more ideas using the interview and diamond ranking. Therefore it is important to use a variety of media as the children have different preferences and abilities.

The use of photographs in this research was quite labour intensive but for older or more able young people they could be asked to independently take photographs with a disposable camera, and once they were developed, group them into objects that signified things they liked and disliked. They could then be asked to give an explanation in a written form and staff could analyse the responses at a later time. The photograph method could also be used to answer other questions such as, 'places I feel safe and unsafe', or 'items that encourage me to be healthy and unhealthy'

The methods that produced the greatest consistency of answers were the interviews and diamond ranking (a quarter of the total answers): Steven mentioned football through all three methods, Jessica mentioned numeracy, literacy and her dislike of playing outside, Paul mentioned playground games and Sarah her dislike of assemblies through all three. The photographs showed the least degree of correlation, with only Steven mentioning the same likes/dislikes in both the interview and photograph, and both Steven and Jessica mentioning the same likes/dislikes in the diamond ranking and photographs. Taking the photographs was very popular with the children; there was only one child who appeared to just snap away and not to think about which photographs he was taking (Paul). However, he was able to use the photographs to express the view that he wanted to have packed lunches and not school dinners. Adam was able to tell the interviewer more about what he liked and disliked through the photographs than either of the verbal means due to his limited verbal communication skills. He shared 11 likes through the photographs but only half that number using either of the two verbal means of communication. Sarah took the lowest number of photographs but produced the biggest diamond and longest length of average utterance in the interview; she obviously preferred verbal methods of expressing herself.

In this research, while the majority of responses were only mentioned in one medium, 42% of responses were triangulated by being mentioned in more than one medium. This could be seen as a weakness of the research as there was not a great deal of correlation between the different research methods. Alternatively it could be seen as a strength as the children were able to use different media to express their views and using three types of media allowed more views to be expressed. The researcher was quite pleased with the level of triangulation of responses and viewed it as significant that no child contradicted themselves by mentioning something that they liked using one type of medium but then saying they disliked it using another or visa versa. The latter showed that the children were quite secure in their opinions.

What the children said

Using the three different methods described in detail above it is now important to consider what messages the children conveyed about their experiences of variously inclusive schools. These comparisons must be viewed in the context of the small number of case study children and the fact that it is by no means a representative sample. The data was derived from one girl from a special school, two boys from mainstream schools and two girls and a boy from an enhanced resource school.

Feelings

The general conclusion from the children about their variously inclusive school placements is that their experiences were overwhelmingly positive. When asked what they liked doing at school the children mentioned a wide variety of activities. Some were classroom lessons – Jessica named them as literacy and numeracy. The others talked about specific parts of numeracy that they liked: Emily liked counting; Paul liked counting money, counting in French and telling the time; Sarah liked adding up.

Other activities that were mentioned by several children were creative activities. Jessica, Adam, Steven and Sarah mentioned painting. Drawing was a favourite for Steven and Sarah; watching videos was also mentioned by these two. Another theme of activities the children liked was playing with friends and in the playground. Adam, Steven and Emily mentioned football as a favourite activity. Paul preferred playing imaginative games with three of his friends. Friends also featured for Jessica in what she liked to do in school: 'I like playing with Sophia', 'I like bringing her toys'. Sarah was the child who had the longest list and greatest variety of things she liked at school.

Paul took a great number of photographs of items that he said he liked but in the researcher's opinion he just liked the idea of being allowed to take photographs. He did, however, want to take a picture of the playground because he liked that, which backs up some of what he said in his interview. Paul's diamond ranking also mentioned the playground several times in the top half of the diamond and the games he liked playing in the playground that also featured in his interview. Emily did not do the diamond ranking or take any photographs as after the interview she wanted to return to the classroom. Sarah was much more considered in her photograph taking than Paul and talked through why she had chosen certain things. For Sarah there was considerable cross-over in the diamond ranking and the interview answers – the cross-outs of Teletubbies, teddy assembly, after school club, trains at the after school club and lunchtimes were all mentioned as activities she liked in the interview and appeared in the top half of the diamond ranking.

In her interview Jessica talked about liking both numeracy and literacy and to reinforce this view she took photographs of the resources in the cupboards that were used for these activities, the table where she worked in the classroom and a general shot of the classroom. In the diamond ranking numeracy and literacy appeared in the middle row.

Adam really liked the camera and taking photographs and used up the whole film, but he did seem to be thinking about what he was taking rather than just snapping away like Paul. Due to the non-verbal aspect of using the camera Adam came up with a greater number of things he liked in school by using it. Adam said in the interview that there was not anything he did not like in school so his diamond in the diamond ranking exercise was more like a pyramid of things he liked. Football and 'scoring a goal in the net' ranked highly and he also mentioned football in the

interview. Wet play toys were mentioned both in the diamond ranking and interview as things he liked. Steven showed a great deal of consistency in his like for football; it was the first thing he mentioned in the interview, the top of his diamond ranking and he took a photograph of his friend's football that they used to play with at break time. Rugby and tennis also featured at the top of his diamond ranking; he obviously likes his sport. Playing in the playground featured in the middle of Steven's diamond ranking and he also took a photograph of the playground.

When asked what it was at school that the children did not like there were far fewer responses. This could be because the children were genuinely happy at school and found it difficult to come up with any aspects of school they did not like. Another point of view could be that it was more difficult for the children to express negative views. When asked in the interview what the children disliked about school Adam and Paul both said they liked everything and Emily just said 'home'. When I rephrased the question using the word 'sad' Paul came up with 'fall over in the playground', which he told the researcher had happened on the way to school that morning and he had cried. Emily and Adam had the most limited verbal communicative ability in the study and it could be hypothesised that they did not understand the negative question. However, Adam's following response might suggest otherwise:

Interviewer: 'Bobby doesn't like having to count, he doesn't like having to sit in the hall. What do you not like at school?'

Adam: 'Not.'

Interviewer: 'You like everything?'

Adam: 'Yes.'

Interviewer: 'So you never feel sad at school?'

Adam: 'No.'

Interviewer: 'So how do you feel at school?'

Adam: 'Happy.'

It should also be noted that both Emily and Adam independently identified the sad symbol that accompanied the 'not like' question. Therefore, in the interviewer's opinion, the question was understood.

Sarah and Steven gave quite full answers to the things they did not like; they were the children with the greatest communicative ability. Both of them talked about relationships rather than subjects or activities. Sarah did not like being told off and Steven talked about not liking being called names at school.

Steven did not mention name calling in the diamond ranking or while taking photographs. He mentioned not liking homework in both the interview and the diamond ranking (bottom point of the diamond). Steven was able to show some interesting dislikes through the use of the photographs.

Sarah was the only child to mention negative feelings about any adults. Sarah's initial comment 'I know what makes me feel a bit sad – the teachers shouting', out of context, could be showing that Sarah saw school in a negative light; however, she then went on to say she did not like her mother doing the same thing. The most telling comment was 'I don't like being told off', which from the researcher's general observations of Sarah in school gets to the heart of the matter.

Jessica expressed one clear dislike through all three methods. She said she disliked playing outside when it rained, in the thunder and clouds in the interview and diamond ranking; she also took a photograph of the outside playground in the rain. The other dislike that she revealed through the photograph taking and verbally

explained to me while taking it was connected to another child in her class. Jessica took a photograph of Billy's chair and said she disliked having to sit next to him because he sometimes hurt her.

There are some interesting tentative patterns that seemed to emerge when comparing what the children said they liked/disliked. The two children at the mainstream school did not mention any 'academic' activities when asked what they liked at school and yet all the other children mentioned these types of activities. They were much more interested in the social aspects of school in the playground and with sport and PE.

The child in the special school mentioned numeracy, literacy and creative activities as likes at school. She liked all these classroom activities but disliked PE and playing outside. This could be viewed as a gender difference, but when considering the children who attend the enhanced resource school both girls indicated they liked playing outside and the boy liked numeracy activities along with his two female peers. It could be hypothesised that the social side of school life was more important to the children in the mainstream school and the academic to the child in the special school, with the enhanced resource school children enjoying both aspects. Further weight could be given to this argument by the fact that one of the boys in the mainstream school had homework as one of his greatest dislikes, which is the academic part of school encroaching on home.

Friends

Friends came up at several points during the activities with the children, not just when they were specifically asked about them. Paul, Steven and Jessica (one child from each type of school provision) all mentioned activities with friends when they were asked what they liked at school. When specifically asked about friends all the children were quick to name a number of friends. Emily (who has limited verbal abilities) was the only one who was initially not able to name any friends although the interviewer had observed her on many occasions in school playing with her peers. When another child walked past the door to the interview room Emily said she played with her; this had been observed several times by the interviewer. The teaching assistant prompted Emily by saying 'You have got a big friend in your class that you play with, haven't you. A boy called ...'. Emily replied 'Tim'. Most of the children mentioned the name of three or four friends. Steven gave me a long list of 13 friends! The majority of the names mentioned by the children were ones that the interviewer recognised from the observations that she had carried out in the schools. The names given showed a gender mix apart from Paul's friends. He mentioned without any prompting 'It's only girls, not the boys'; when the interviewer asked why, he said 'because they have never been friends'.

The children's talk of their friends painted a very positive picture that gave no indication of the children being isolated in any of the different school settings. In her research about transition from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2, Bearne (2002: 123) found: 'For many of the children in the project, friendship was a key to successful learning'.

The interviewer also asked if there were particular friends that the children worked with in class or that sat on the same worktable as them. Paul mentioned three of the four girls he had identified as friends; Adam and Steven mentioned one name that they had mentioned previously, but also talked about other children who sat on their table. Jessica mentioned two different names and Sarah did not recognise that she had any friends who helped her or that she worked with.

The interviewer asked, 'Bobby sits on his table with Kyle and Peter and he works with them. Who do you work with? Who do you sit on a table with?'

Sarah replied, 'I work with some ladies, I sometimes work with Mrs Killing and Mrs Kemp. Mrs Kemp goes with me at playtime'.

When Jessica and Steven were asked 'Who helps you in class?', they also mentioned LSAs by name. Paul said 'No, I can do it' and Adam mentioned the name of one of his friends. Emily did not answer this question.

It was interesting and unexpected that when asked whom they worked with at school the majority of children identified peers. Only Sarah (who attends the enhanced resource school) did not recognise her peers in this role and talked about support staff. One child from the special school (Jessica) and one from the mainstream school (Steven) identified support staff when asked about who helped them in school. One child from the enhanced resource school (Paul) and one from the mainstream school (Adam) said that friends helped them. It is of note, however, that the only real difference that Jessica identified between her time at special school and the one-and-a-half days a week at mainstream was that staff helped her at the special school and a friend helped her at the mainstream school. The children therefore identified that they mainly worked with peers at school but they felt their help came from both staff and peers, with no particular pattern with reference to the type of school provision they attended. Staff were only mentioned by half the children in the interviews and activities and these children only mentioned them once; it seems that their peers were far more important to them.

Two of the children commented negatively about the actions of other children: the girl from the special school (Jessica) and one of the boys from the mainstream school (Steven). Both these incidences could be viewed as bullying. Ingeniously using the photographs, Jessica was able to communicate that she did not like being hurt by a particular pupil; she took a photograph of his special chair in the classroom. Steven said that he did not like being called names at school. However, this should be taken in context – Steven thought of two other dislikes first (the ball not being passed to him in football and homework) before he mentioned that he did not like being called names. He was also clear about what he had to do when others called him names and seemed satisfied with the help the adults gave him. He also indicated that he had lots of friends and did not seem at all distressed when he was talking about the name calling. However, when he was shown a sad picture about Bobby, Steven immediately assumed that Bobby had been called names and this had made him sad. He then went on to explain to Bobby how he should tell his mother who would tell the headteacher and she would sort it out. Name calling had obviously been part of Steven's experience at school but he seemed to think it had been well dealt with by the adults he trusted. In the interviewer's opinion, Steven showed that he had a strong self-image as he mentioned many friends and chose to take a photograph of the good work board, telling the researcher that his friends often chose his name to go on the board. However, while taking a photograph, he said that he did not like the merit points board because the teacher took points away and, while taking a photograph of the unifix cubes arranged on top of the interactive whiteboard, he said that he did not like whole class numeracy work because he got the answers wrong. The researcher's conclusion from listening to Steven was that he derived a great deal of pleasure from his peers and the games they played together but found the academic side of school life stressful.

Futures

The interviewer wanted to ask the children about the future as this was a great concern to their parents when they were interviewed. Most of the children did not

have any concept of moving on to secondary school apart from Jessica, whose move was imminent, and Steven. Jessica was the oldest interviewee being in Year 6; she therefore knew about moving to a new secondary school and seemed quite happy about it. Steven knew which secondary school he was going to, to Kings, but then he said:

'My friend Arron is going to Queens because there is lots of bullying in Kings.... I want to go to Queens but Mum won't let me yet because she's heard there is lots of bullying there.'

Bullying was obviously closely connected to his thoughts about secondary school. This was interesting because when his mother had been interviewed she expressed similar concerns about secondary school. Steven seemed to be indicating that there were concerns about bullying whichever secondary school you went to rather than at one particular school. None of the other children expressed such concerns.

All the children were confident about expressing an opinion about what they wanted to be when they grew up. The answers were, in the interviewer's opinion, quite typical of any primary child's responses: a doctor, a nurse, a soldier, a footballer and a builder.

Individual issues

As a teacher the researcher found the individual issues that were raised by the children fascinating; to an adult they might seem insignificant, but to the child they were very important for their enjoyment of school. Not only were they vital for the child's enjoyment of school, but might also be easily implemented by the adults working with the children. These included the fact that Sarah revealed through the diamond ranking that she liked blowing her nose on wipes but disliked using tissues. By using photographs Adam communicated that he liked the class play he had watched recently but disliked the toilets; he had had quite a few issues at school around toileting that may well explain his opinion. Paul took a photograph of his classmates' lunchboxes; he then said he wanted to have packed lunches but his parents said he had to have school dinners. These issues may all seem peripheral to the adults in school but were obviously extremely important to the children's enjoyment of school.

Implications for the leadership of inclusive schools

As has been described by the findings expressed above, the children that took part in this research were very able to express their opinions on a variety of topics. It is important that any gathering of pupils' views is directly related to their experience of school, particularly with younger and more 'difficult to reach' children. This research covered topics of curriculum content, relationships and aspirations but the questions put to the children needed to be directly related to their world of school. These children were young and had significant difficulties with communication but by using several different methods they were able to express their opinions. Schools can only be seen as inclusive if they value and meet the needs of all of their pupils. Listening to the voices of all pupils is therefore of paramount importance.

In this research these children's voices told us that the curriculum needed to be broad and balanced because different children liked different activities. Activities that taught academic and social skills were both important. Some children valued the learning that took place in the playground; others disliked physical activities. These children told us that relationships were of vital importance and activities with friends were often the favourite ones. All the children could name friends and none seemed to be isolated. Friends were important to the children and as school leaders we need to ensure that sufficient opportunity is given to develop friendships in school and skills are taught to children as to how to maintain those relationships. Adults were mentioned by these children as helping with work, but it was other children who seemed to have the most important role to play in school life.

Conclusion

By using a variety of methods, this research was able to build up a rich picture of the opinions of this small group of children in variously inclusive primary school placements. The researcher was pleased with the number of responses that were given to the questions considering the limited communicative ability of the group. The variety of methods that were used to gain the children's views was important to the breadth and depth of opinions that were expressed. Different children seemed to prefer different research methods. In this study three methods were used: interviews supported by a puppet and symbols, which was favoured by the more verbally able, diamond ranking, which involved a game element, and taking photographs, which involved physically moving around school and was most popular with the children who had less verbal ability. As school leaders it is important to consider the variety of methods that are used to elicit pupils' opinions as different children will respond to different opportunities. It is an important part of the school self-assessment process to consider marginalised groups within the school; therefore opinions of these groups of pupils need to be sought and a more creative approach may well be needed to ascertain what these are. The variety of methods used to elicit the pupils' opinions need to be differentiated to match pupils' abilities and aptitudes. The methods used in this research catered for pupils who had different preferences of learning style, whether that be visual (photographs, diamond ranking and use of symbols), auditory (discussion with the puppet) or kinaesthetic (photographs). Although the participants in this study were primary-age children with severe learning difficulties it was easy to indicate how the methods could be used with older pupils or those that were not restricted by special needs.

This research does not indicate that children are happier or form better relationships with adults and their peers depending on the inclusivity of their school placement. In these aspects there was much uniformity of opinion among the children in the three different types of school placement. The research did indicate that the children in mainstream schools found the social side of school more important, whereas in special schools it was the academic side; the enhanced resource school seemed to find the balance between the two. As school leaders it is interesting to reflect on the relative importance that is placed on the social versus academic attainment of special needs pupils and whether one aspect should be emphasised above the other.

Looking at an individual level at the like/dislike opinions of the children it is important for the teachers to know what are motivators for their pupils as this can then be used to tailor lessons to increase motivation. Obviously all lessons cannot be tailored to 30 different pupil preferences but pupils could be grouped according to shared motivators and lessons delivered having regard to that preference. For the children in this study the majority of what was indicated as disliked in school involved relationships rather than specific activities or subjects. Therefore it is important for staff to reflect on the quality of their relationships with pupils and those of their peers as this may well be the difference between happiness and unhappiness for a child at school. The more negative views on relationships were spread equally among the children from different types of provision; one child from the enhanced resource school described not liking being reprimanded, one child from the special school and one from the mainstream school mentioning bullying.

Friends were equally important and available to children in the different types of placement and adults equally disregarded. The children mentioned positively the help that peers gave them at school as well as the friendship. This may well be an important message for school staff as we may need to consider an increase in peer mentoring and children working in collaborative groups. This can be a particularly

difficult issue in special schools where all the children may have a level of ability that they would find helping one another difficult.

The children were overwhelmingly positive about their school placement and they seemed to view the actions and company of their peers as more important than the adults in their school environment. School leaders spend a tremendous amount of time, energy and other resources on ensuring that staff are recruited, trained and every aspect of their performance is managed. However, is a comparable effort afforded to ensuring that the correct environment is available for the pupils' peer relationships to develop and flourish? According to this sample of children those relationships are more important than anything the adult may do. I would agree with Jones (2005: 61):

In the design of children's services, the role of the adult is dominant, often to the detriment of the perspective of the children.

From the results of this research it does not seem that children find adults all that important with regards to their enjoyment of school. Perhaps we ought to listen more to the views of children when we are trying to 'get it right' for the 'flexible continuum of provision for children with SEN' espoused by the government (Her Majesty's Government 2006: 25).

References

- Bearne, E, 2002, 'A good listening to: Year 3 pupils talk about learning', *Support for Learning*, **17** (3), 122–7
- Brook, L, Katz, A and Stockdale, D, 2005, *A Strategy for Inclusion and Special Educational Needs: Towards Enhanced Educational Provision for Coventry 2005*, East Molesey, Young Voice
- Cavet, J and Sloper, P, 2004, 'Participation of disabled children in individual decisions about their lives and public decisions about service development', *Children and Society*, **18**, 278–90
- Detheridge, T, 2000, 'Research involving children with severe learning difficulties', in A Lewis and G Lindsay, eds, *Researching Children's Perspectives*, Buckingham, Open University Press, pp 112–21
- DfES (Department for Education and Skills), 2001, *Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Pupils with Special Educational Needs*, London, DfES
- DfES, 2002, *The Education Act 2002*, London, The Stationery Office
- DfES, 2003, *Every Child Matters*, London, The Stationery Office
- DfES, 2004, *Special Educational Needs Regional Partnerships Case Study 9, The SEN Regional Partnerships and the Voice of the Child and Young Person*, London, DfES
- DH (Department of Health), 1989, *The Children Act 1989*, London, The Stationery Office
- DH, 2001, *Valuing People: A Strategy for Learning Disability for the 21st Century*, London, DH
- DRC (Disability Rights Commission), 2002, *Code of Practice for Schools: Disability Discrimination Act 1995: Part 4*, Stratford on Avon, DRC
- Dockrell, J., Lewis, A. and Lindsay, G., (2000) 'Researching children's perspectives; a psychological dimension', in Lewis, A. and Lindsay, G. (Eds), *Researching Children's Perspectives*, Buckingham: Open University Press, pp. 46-58.
- Harrison, G, Tuckett, P and Smith, J, 2004, *Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down*, Brighton, Triangle
- Her Majesty's Government, 2006, *Government Response to the Education and Skills Select Committee Report on Special Educational Needs*, London, The Stationery Office
- House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2006 *Special Educational Needs Report*, London, The Stationery Office
- Jones, P, 2005, 'Inclusion: lessons from the children', *British Journal of Special Education*, **32** (2), 60–6

Lewis, A, 2001, 'Reflections on interviewing children and young people as a method of inquiry in exploring their perspectives on integration/inclusion', *Journal of Special Educational Needs*, **1** (3), 2–11

Lewis, A., (2002) 'Accessing through research interviews, the views of children with difficulties', *Support for Learning*, Vol.17, No.4, pp. 110-116.

Lewis, A., (2004) 'And when did you last see your father?' Exploring the views of children with learning difficulties / disabilities,' *British Journal of Special Education*, Vol. 31, No.1, pp.3-9.

Lewis, A, Robertson, C and Parsons, S, 2005, *DRC Research Report – Experiences of Disabled Students and their Families: Phase 1*, Stratford on Avon, Disability Rights Commission

Masson, J, 2000, 'Researching children's perspectives; legal issues', in A Lewis and G Lindsay, eds, *Researching Children's Perspectives*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 34–45

May, H, 2005, 'Whose participation is it anyway? Examining the context of pupil participation in the UK', *British Journal of Special Education*, **32** (1), 29–34

Messiou, K, 2002, 'Marginalisation in primary schools: listening to children's voices', *Support for Learning*, **17** (3), 117–21

Mills, J, 2004, 'Research with children, a contradiction in terms?', *Primary Practice*, **36**, 29–34

Ofsted, 2005, *Framework for the Inspection of Schools in England from September 2005*, London, Ofsted

Preece, D and Timmins, P, 2004, 'Consulting with students: evaluating a mainstream inclusion centre', *Support for Learning*, **19** (1), 24–30

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the children with whom I spent time for this research study and the staff at the schools they attend.

Thanks also go to Geoff Lindsay, my tutor at Warwick University, for his support and critical friendship, and the governors of Hawkesbury Fields School and Corley Centre for their support.

Disclaimer:

In publishing Research Associate reports, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) is offering a voice to practitioner leaders to communicate with their colleagues. Individual reports reflect personal views based on evidence-based research and as such are not statements of NCSL policy.