How EPs record the Voice of the Child

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Legislation, literature and research have recently advocated the importance of establishing and representing the views of children and young people. This study aimed to establish how EPs in one authority ascertain and present children's views in written reports. Content analysis was undertaken on the pupil's view section of 30 Year 9 transition reports to determine the themes represented. Additionally focus group interviews helped identify EPs' methods for collecting, selecting and reporting pupil views, indicating a wide variety of practice. EPs are challenged to explore report writing practices, in terms of representing the voice of the child, within their professional contexts.

Introduction

'We would not think of constructing a case study without collecting the opinions of the adults involved in a situation, so why would we ignore the views of the consumers of education – the children?' (Costley, 2000, p.172)

In 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child provided a landmark in the development of rights for children, highlighting that children have a right to express an opinion and to have that opinion taken into account in any matters affecting them. Davie (1993) illustrated that listening to children embodies the central issues of efficacy and equity while Messiou (2002) asserts the right of children to be listened to as a key element in the

progress and process of inclusion. However, while current research, literature and legislation emphasise the significance of giving children a voice and involving them in decisions surrounding their education, there is evidence that they are often left out of decision making processes (Armstrong et al 1993; Rose, 2005) and that more needs to be done to access children's views and promote their involvement (Todd, 2003a, b; Soar et al, 2005; MacConville, 2006).

Why Listen to Children with SEN?

Research suggests that listening to the views of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) is beneficial for a number of reasons. Todd (2003a) writes that pupil participation is particularly important for children with SEN while Roller (1998) suggests that there are clear advantages to involving children with SEN in assessment, planning and review processes. These include increased motivation; independence; perception of personal control; the development of meta learning skills such as reflection, planning and monitoring; knowledge of learning styles and individual strengths and difficulties; personal responsibility for progress; and a greater responsibility for change and progress.

However, research carried out by Noble (2003) indicates that the opinions of young people with SEN are rarely asked for, and when they are consulted the process is often tokenistic and their views largely ignored. According to MacConville (2006) the voice of the pupil with SEN has tended to be silenced

by professional discourses, thereby sometimes reducing pupils to passive recipients of specialist services.

It is important that giving the child a voice enables them to participate in decisions and arrangements concerning their education. Todd (2003a) advocates that if pupils are part of the decision making process, they can provide appropriate information about their skills and abilities and offer their views about possible interventions, enhancing the likelihood of successful outcomes. According to Rose (2005) young people from marginalised groups, such as those with disabilities, have remained on the periphery of decision making processes in education, even though it is quite likely that the outcomes will have a profound impact on their lives.

Current Legislation and the Voice of the Child

The importance of enabling children to have a voice in decisions regarding their life and learning is a central feature within education policy and practice. Pupil participation was integral to the development of Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003) and notably, a young person's paper was produced (DfES, 2005), the first time that a paper has been written specifically for young people. Children's participation has a dedicated action plan (DfES, 2002a) and is also addressed in the 2002 Education Act (DfES, 2002b) under a section entitled 'Consultation with Pupils'.

Current SEN policies promote pupil involvement in decisions surrounding their education and illustrate that it is important to listen to the views of children

with SEN. The Code of Practice (DfES, 2001a) promotes pupil participation, emphasising the right of children with SEN to be involved in making decisions and exercising choices, and the importance of ascertaining their wishes and feelings. The SEN Toolkit (DfES, 2001b) meanwhile acknowledges that children should be encouraged to participate in all decision making processes that occur in education, including setting learning targets, developing individual education plans (IEPs), selecting schools and contributing to assessments and reviews.

The Role of the EP and the Voice of the Child

Burden (1996) argues that EPs commonly do things *to* children and *for* children, yet far too infrequently do things *with* children. Todd et al (2000) write that a central concern of every EP should be how to develop professional practice that genuinely enables the views of children and young people to be heard. According to the Educational Psychology Services Report of the Working Group (DfEE, 2000) EPs are well placed to ensure that children's views are both elicited in a neutral way and included in plans being proposed for them.

Gray (2004) however cautions that there is a danger in exhorting the benefits of ascertaining pupil voice without considering the practicalities and issues in ensuring children's voices are properly heard. Gersch (1996) considers that the genuine involvement of pupils is impossible without appropriate vehicles for children to convey their beliefs. Discussing this issue, Todd (2003b) suggests that the most common approach to involving children is to just ask

them their views (for example what they like and dislike about school or how they see their own abilities and problems) or to fill in a form by completing the endings to a series of '*I like...*' or '*I dislike...*' statements. Todd (2003b) believes that this is not sufficient and states that children often have no idea how decisions have been reached about them.

There are other problems related to the reliability and validity of children's expressed views. For example, Lewis (2002) suggests that if we ask children about which schools they prefer when seeking educational preferences, we may instead be obtaining comments about friendship patterns, as children tend to prefer schools to which friends go. She also challenges the use of question and answer techniques which mean '*the adult keeps the 'upper hand*'' (page 113). Cohen et al (2000) identify some of the issues involved with interviewing children, which include establishing trust, finding ways to move beyond the responses they think the interviewer wants to hear and pitching questions at the right level.

Recording the Voice of the Child

One way of ensuring that children's voices are represented is for the EP to ascertain their views and wishes and to record them in a report. Thus the content of the section of the report pertaining to the child's views is of great consequence. Therefore surprising is the dearth of research and literature relating to the EP's role in recording the voice of the child.

The Code of Practice (DfES, 2001a) states that EPs should *'listen to the child's views and record those views within any reports or reviews'* (3:12).

The language an EP chooses when reporting the voice of the child needs to be carefully considered so that the content represents the child's own voice.

However, May (2004) cautions that the emphasis on professionals eliciting pupils' perspectives relies on adult interpretation of the pupils' responses, which may lead to inaccuracies in how the voice of the pupil is represented.

Todd (2003b) supports this, noting that professionals must think about how they communicate the voice of the child in reports in order to allow children to become involved in decisions about their education.

Fielding (2004) discusses the dangers of speaking about others, and believes that the language used to report student voice is likely to be saturated with values. A research report from the National Children's Bureau (Danson et al, 2003) examining the involvement of children in promoting change and enhancing the quality of social care, proposes that when children's views are presented through reports, more use should be made of the child's actual words, rather than the professional's paraphrase.

Summary

The importance of children's views being ascertained and accurately represented is advocated in both legislation and research, with methods of ascertaining and representing the voice of the child attracting debate.

However, one area which has not yet been the focus for research is the EP's

role in recording the voice of the child. This study aims to address this by considering the following research questions:

1. What are the key themes that EPs record in the child's view section of a report?
2. What evidence is there that the child's views about decisions and arrangements are recorded by EPs?
3. What techniques and strategies do EPs use to ascertain the child's views?
4. How do EPs select and represent the child's views?

Methodology

This study was undertaken within a small metropolitan Local Authority (LA) where the EPS had prioritised developing practice relating to promoting the voice of the child. It involved two tiers of data analysis, both undertaken by the first author as an external Educational Psychologist in Training (EPiT) researcher, thus ensuring objectivity. In order to address the first two research questions data were collected from the child's view section of EP reports and a content analysis was carried out to establish key themes. A focus group approach was then used to ascertain techniques and strategies used by EPs in ascertaining the child's voice and establishing how information was then selected and reported.

Report analysis

Thirty randomly selected transition review reports were collected, for children with statements in the same year group (Year 9). These included reports

from pupils attending both mainstream and special schools and experiencing a range of difficulties representing the areas of need detailed in the Code of Practice: communication and interaction; cognition and learning; behaviour, emotional and social development; and sensory and/or physical (DfES, 2001a).

The reports were particularly appropriate for data analysis because all statemented Year 9 pupils within this LA are routinely reviewed and EP reports include a discrete section where pupil views are represented. Additionally the views of young people of a similar age are represented, making data comparison more straightforward. Random selection was achieved by selecting every third child from a list of statemented Year 9 pupils. The pupil view sections of these reports were then photocopied and separated from the main body of the report in order to maintain the confidentiality of the young person and the authoring EP. A content analysis of these sections of the reports was then carried out in order to identify key themes. Because of the need to maintain anonymity, pupil data (e.g. gender) was not collected. However, during the data analysis it became evident that there were significantly more boys than girls in the sample, reflecting an over representation of boys amongst SEN and statemented children, both within the LA and nationally (DCFS, 2007).

Content analysis allows for the exploration and description of the data being studied. As in grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, cited in Robson, 2002), open and axial coding was carried out to find themes in the data and

identify relationships between them. This involves splitting the data into discrete parts called recording units (the recording unit in this study being one statement). To achieve this, the child's view sections of the reports were photocopied, cut up to separate each of the statements, placed into categories and allocated appropriate codes. The statements were independently categorised and coded by an EPiT colleague who did not participate in the research, to enable triangulation.

Focus group

A focus group, involving six out of the seven EPs then working for the LA, was facilitated by the first author, with the aim of considering how EPs within the service ascertained children's views, and what strategies or techniques they used to do so. Limitations of the focus group approach are acknowledged, particularly as the participants were colleagues in an EPS. Robson (2002) for example notes that not all group members may share their views equally and that personality and status issues can be influential.

Four questions were presented to the participants:

- What key themes do you think should be recorded within the child's view section of a report?
- What techniques and strategies do you use to ascertain the child's views for Year 9 transition reports?

- Why have you chosen to include the information that you have reported in the child's view section and what criteria do you use for selecting this information?
- How do you report the child's views and do you record how the child's views were ascertained?

Two sets of data were analysed from the focus group. A written record of the main points discussed following each question was noted down on a flip chart by a scribe (an EP member of the focus group) during the session. This information was therefore available throughout the session and participants were invited to add or correct information so that the notes were an accurate record of the views expressed. Additionally the focus group was audiotaped and transcribed. Cohen et al (2000) note methodological problems with transcription in that the focus group becomes a record of data, rather than of social encounter and overlooks important contextual information such as visual and non-verbal cues.

Information was also collected about how the child's views are reported by EPs and the criteria for including information in the child's view section. EPs were also asked what they thought should be included in the child's view section of the report.

Results

What are the key themes that EPs record in the child's view section of a report?

Open and axial coding yielded eight key themes. These themes are presented below, ordered according to the most common. Figures in brackets indicate the overall percentages of statements relating to each theme.

1. Behaviour, interests and preferences outside school (19.5%)

This included issues such as behaviour out of school, pupils' interests or preferences out of school, and aspirations and ambitions. An example of a statement included in this theme is, *'He helps his mum and dad and younger brother around the house.'*

2. Decisions and arrangements concerning the young person's education (16.1%)

Statements included in this theme encompassed feelings about what would make school better or easier; and the identification of strategies useful to the young person. Also included were views about present support arrangements and ideas about what the children wanted to improve. (Example – *'He stressed that he did not want to return to mainstream'*).

Findings here relate specifically to the second research question ***What evidence is there that the child's views about decisions and arrangements are recorded by EPs?*** The fact that this was the second most commonly represented theme, accounting for 16.1% of the statements

made in the child's view section, would strongly suggest that EPs are reporting children's views in relation to decisions and arrangements.

The statements related to this issue fell into four main categories. The percentage of statements relating to each sub theme is expressed here as a percentage of total focus group statements.

- Present arrangements/support (6.1%)
- Strategies that child finds useful (4.6%)
- What would make school better/easier? (4.2%)
- What the child wants to improve (1.1%).

This suggests views about current provision and about useful or beneficial strategies and arrangements are perceived are the most widely reported.

3. Feelings about school (16.1%)

Incorporated within this theme are young people's feelings about school generally and views about particular aspects of school, including friendships, homework, worries or fears, and teachers. (Example – *'He was quite positive about his enjoyment of school, giving an overall rating of 7 out of 10'*).

4. Difficulties in school (14.9%)

Sub themes represented here included areas of weaknesses, problems and difficulties and the young person's views or feelings about their SEN.

(Example – *‘...she indicates that when she becomes upset and annoyed at things she finds it difficult to control her behavioural responses’*).

5. Preferences in school (11.9%)

Amongst this theme was information about favourite subjects and other school preferences. (Example - *He indicated that he enjoyed all his subjects, with his most favourite being Maths, English and Art*).

6. General information about the young person (11.5%)

This covered areas including medical information and independence skills (including self help and personal hygiene). Also within this theme are included statements which constitute descriptions of the pupil during the EP’s visit, both in relation to the young person’s qualities and behaviours.

(Example – *‘He described several changes of school in his primary school years and this could have been a factor in the poor development of his literacy skills’*).

7. Strengths in school (5.4%)

This theme, representing a smaller percentage of overall statements included strengths and areas where the young person felt they had improved.

(Example – *‘She believes she has made progress in all subjects, particularly English, Maths and Science’*).

8. Dislikes in school (4.6%)

Incorporated here are statements about least preferred subjects and other dislikes in school. (Example – *‘When asked to identify lessons he dislikes he replied “English – it’s too noisy”’*).

Focus group views about what should be recorded in the child’s view section of reports

When asked *‘What key themes/ information do you think should be recorded within the child’s view section of a Year 9 transition report?’* focus group members provided a range of responses, most of which tallied with themes which were identified within the reports during the process of coding (see previous section). Other items acknowledged as being significant included self esteem and information on social relationships and bullying.

EPs felt it was important to ask the young person to review their progress in relation to SEN statement objectives; asking them for their perspective on support required and to state what recommendations should be included in the EP’s report. One EP advocated that *“The key question is “What help do you get for your difficulties?” And sub questions such as “Is it enough? And how do you feel about it?””*

What techniques and strategies do EPs use to ascertain the child’s views?

Focus group EPs identified a wide range of practices relating to gathering information about children’s views. These included:

- *Discussion based methods*, including direct questioning, which EPs reported to be the most frequently used method. Using the child's SEN statement as a framework for discussion was also identified as a useful technique.
- *Task related procedures* such as sentence completion tasks and questionnaires, examples of which included *Myself as a Learner* (Burden, 1998) and reading motivation inventories. Skills profiles and self-report scales were also methods used by EPs.
- *Therapeutic based approaches*. These incorporated Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) tasks, such as the three comments described by Beaver (1996), asking the child how a third party would describe them. Solution focused methods, including scaling were also popular.
- *Indirect methods*, which included examining past reports to track a child's journey through education; or asking parents, or familiar adults about a child's preferences and dislikes.
- *Measures specific to children in special school* such as Bear Cards (St Luke's Family Care, 1997) and the All About Me profile (NSPCC, 2008).

Group members noted that different factors impacted on decisions made about which techniques to use to ascertain children's views. These included the age of the child and the nature of their SEN. Time available for the child interview was also cited as a determining aspect.

Selecting report information and representing the child's views

Focus group EPs were asked *'Why have you chosen to include the information that you have reported in the child's view section and what criteria do you use for selecting this information?'* Amongst the responses was an identification of the need to be aware of both the purpose of the report and the audience and therefore to *'use professional judgement.'* Another objective was to create a pen picture of the child, to provide context for report readers who may never meet the child. EPs were very aware of the advocacy role in report writing and were keen to present information which would help to make things better for the child; also of the need to filter information sensitively so that positive attributes were recognised, alongside the child's needs.

In order to establish the process for reporting and recording the child's views, focus group EPs were asked *'How do you report the child's views? Do you record how the child's views were ascertained?'* There was a lack of consensus here about providing an explanation of the process for obtaining children's views, with some, but not all EPs stating that they would preface the section by describing how the child's views were ascertained. EPs also differentially reported quoting, interpreting, paraphrasing or summarising children's views.

Issues relating to the intended audience and to quality assurance were considerations, particularly relating to the language used to describe children's views. Participants were aware both of the impact of the reports on children's self-esteem and of potential consequences of reporting children's

unequivocal feedback (e.g. about non preferred lessons or members of staff). Focus group EPs were also very aware of the often 'one-off' representation of the child's perspective, one member stating that, *"One thing that bothers me is it is just a snapshot. You really need several meetings. That is one of the inadequacies of a one-off interview."*

Discussion

Analysis of the pupil view sections of EP reports and of the focus group discussion indicates that the breadth and scope of the themes recorded are wide ranging. The prominence of information about young people's interests and behaviours outside of school supports the notion that EPs take a holistic view of young people's development and may allow the child to provide some positive information about themselves, especially if they are experiencing difficulties in school. An important sub theme in these Year 9 reports is the views about ambitions for the future. The SEN Toolkit (2001b) contains a section about involving young people in transition planning in which it states:

'It is imperative that young people are fully involved in making decisions about their future and what they will do when they leave school...Promoting young people's involvement in transition planning means...planning with them rather than for them' (p.11).

The inclusion of information surrounding feelings about school, including preferences, strengths and difficulties, allows the child to present a picture of

how they view various aspects of school life. Gray (2004) notes a need to understand children's perspectives in order to remove barriers to participation and to think more creatively about solutions to problems. Furthermore, Rose (2005) writes that by listening to the voices of learners who often articulate their own needs far more ably than those who surround them, teachers have an opportunity to learn how to operate more effectively in classrooms. Todd (2003a) points out that pupils learn best if they know more about themselves as learners and that therefore ascertaining the child's views about their strengths and difficulties in school enables them to reflect on their learning experiences.

How do EPs ascertain and report children's views

Perhaps the most interesting findings of this research relate to how EPs harness and record children's views for written reports. During the focus group, EPs described a wide range of techniques and strategies which they used to ascertain pupil voice. While there was consensus between EPs that the method selected for use depended on the child's needs, the nature of the interview and the time available, notably, different EPs used different approaches.

The predominant method reported for ascertaining pupil views was direct questioning. Hobbs et al (2000) note that research suggests consulting with children poses difficulties for EP practice and warn that '*Educational Psychologists cannot just ask the child for their view of their situation, and expect them to tell us*' (p.110). In support, Armstrong (1995) found that when

a child was asked their view, they often did not say anything as they did not know what to say. Furthermore, Armstrong et al (1993) found that children rarely believed that genuine attempts were made by EPs to involve them in the formal assessment process, or even encourage them to contribute.

Research indicates that two of the other methods reported for collecting pupil views, PCP and Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) approaches, are useful ways of ascertaining the voice of the child (Roller, 1998; Hobbs et al, 2000). Todd (2003b) points out that the use of scaling to talk about concerns is a helpful way of involving the child in decisions about their learning.

Questionnaires, skills profiles, self report scales and sentence completion tasks were also used by the EPs to ascertain the child's views. Notably, caution should be exercised when choosing these approaches, as Quike (2003) writes that 'off the shelf' questionnaires and attitude scales may not relate to existing views of the particular pupils involved and that many of them have a limited frame of reference.

Because the reports in this study related to the needs of statemented pupils, some EPs noted that they used the targets from the young person's statement as a framework for discussing their progress and the effectiveness of the support they received. Walker (2007), when researching the views of pupils who had had a statement of educational needs ceased found that in many cases pupils were not even aware that they had had a statement or what it said. This presents another dilemma for EPs, concerning what happens to

the information presented as pupil views: is it acted on, communicated to school staff, or even shared with the young person?

The criteria that EPs reported for selecting information to include in the child's view section of the report incorporated the use of professional judgement, awareness of audience, awareness of purpose, playing an advocacy role and sensitivity. Davie (1991) proposes that EPs should be in a position to make professional judgements about a child's maturity and understanding when ascertaining their views.

EPs suggested that a number of factors affected how the child's views were reported such as: the client; the audience; the quality of report required; and the impact of the report on the young person's self esteem. The participant EPs reported that they sometimes quoted the child's views directly, but also tended to interpret or summarise the child's views. Notably, May (2004) points out that the emphasis on professionals eliciting pupils' perspectives relies on adult interpretation of the pupils' responses, which may lead to inaccuracies in how the voice of the pupil is represented. Alderson (2000) emphasises the limitations of a one-off meeting in enabling effective consultation with children to take place.

Many of these responses illustrate tensions which arise out of the need to write reports which are read by different stakeholders, including the young person, parents, schools and LA SEN departments. Some practitioners advocate writing solution-focused reports which are primarily focused towards

the needs of the child and their parents (Rees, 2005). Others suggest that child or young person friendly versions of reports are provided (e.g. Johal-Smith and Stephenson, 2000; Todd et al, 2000) in addition to traditional reports. The latter of course, may have additional time implications, although it is possible that some types of EP involvement might be more appropriately summarised in a letter or pupil report, such as therapeutic or behavioural intervention, self-esteem or social skills work.

Future directions

This research allowed EPs in one authority to examine and challenge the way children's views are ascertained and presented in children's reports. Since the study, several developments have taken place within the service that aim to improve practice in this area. These include:

- The production of a pro forma which offers scaling choices to children and young people (in the form of numbers or smiley faces) allowing them to rate their views of school;
- An increasing number of reports written specifically for children, detailing outcomes of work undertaken with them. These are attractive and colour-printed and have received a positive response from schools, parents and children and young people;
- Greater use of shorter consultation reports for conveying outcomes of ongoing work with children to parents and professionals. These offer the opportunity for pupil views to be expressed and communicated more regularly and over a number of sessions;

- Use of the 'In My Shoes' computer package (Calam et al, 2007) to ascertain the views of pupils with the most significant learning and communication difficulties;
- A Voice of the Child conference. This multiagency event aimed to enable greater understanding of the voice of the child agenda and raise awareness of the legislation and guidance relevant to the participation of children and young people with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (LDD). Children's Services representatives had the opportunity to explore how, through collaboration, opportunities for eliciting and acting on the voice of the child could be developed and extended.

This study analysed reports written for Year 9 pupils within a single LA and thus the results may not be indicative of EP practice in other LAs or with other age groups. Replicating the content analysis, using reports written for children of different ages (for example early years or primary aged children) would allow exploration of whether themes recorded and methods used differ depending on the age of the child. Additionally information about practices in other LAs would be useful in exploring and evaluating different procedures surrounding the voice of the child.

According to May (2005) *'attention to pupil participation within the education system has undoubtedly increased in recent years'* and *'the number of research projects concerning the voice of the child is escalating'* (p.29). The need to continue to explore issues surrounding the voice of the child is

paramount to enabling further understanding of how best to listen to children and allow them to play an active role within their education.

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