

**THE UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER**

Listening to the voice of pupils with complex learning difficulties

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Master of Arts in Education

Faculty of Education, Health and Social Care

**November 2013**

This Independent Study has been completed as a requirement  
for a higher degree of The University of Winchester.

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Since *The Children Act (1989)* which strengthened children's standing in law, legislation has sought to ensure that children have a right to have their voices heard. Such aspirations have been particularly challenging for those with responsibility for eliciting the views of children with complex needs. This research investigates the barriers that prevent children with complex needs having their voices heard and the processes by which schools can listen to the views of their most vulnerable groups. The research was carried out with a small group of children educated within a special school setting, as well as their parents and teachers. Data was gathered by carrying out a visual questionnaire activity with the children, recording observations and using semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers. The report concludes that whilst it is not possible to eliminate all the factors that reduce the authenticity of children's voices, children with complex needs do have the capacity to express their views, provided they are given the appropriate tools. Furthermore, they can do so with a certain amount of autonomy.

## List of Contents

Word Count: 19746

<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>5</b>
AIMS:.....	5
KEY QUESTIONS FOR THE RESEARCH .....	5
<b>LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>7</b>
INTRODUCTION.....	7
HOW HAS PUPIL VOICE BEEN REPRESENTED IN EDUCATION POLICY AND GOVERNMENT LEGISLATION? .....	7
WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR ALL CHILDREN’S VOICES TO BE HEARD? .....	8
WHICH METHODS ARE USED TO GIVE PUPILS A VOICE AND WHAT ARE THEIR LIMITATIONS? .....	11
WHAT ARE THE SPECIFIC PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH FINDING THE VOICE OF CHILDREN WITH COMPLEX LEARNING DIFFICULTIES?.....	13
HOW CAN PROBLEMS BE OVERCOME AND METHODS MADE MORE EFFECTIVE?.....	15
WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH FOR FUTURE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE?.....	19
THE WAY FORWARD .....	22
<b>RESEARCH APPROACH.....</b>	<b>23</b>
INTRODUCTION.....	23
METHODOLOGY .....	24
TRIALLING THE METHOD.....	27
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS .....	28
RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY .....	29
<b>FINDINGS .....</b>	<b>33</b>
INTRODUCTION.....	33
THE CASE STUDIES .....	33
Case Study 1: Amy.....	33
Case Study 2: Colin.....	36
Case Study 3: Maggie.....	39
WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO HEARING THE VOICES OF THE THREE CHILDREN DESCRIBED IN THE CASE STUDIES? .....	41
WHAT ARE THE STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE METHODS USED AS REVEALED BY THE CASE STUDIES? .....	42
<b>ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION .....</b>	<b>45</b>
INTRODUCTION.....	45
WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO HEARING THE VOICE OF CHILDREN WITH COMPLEX NEEDS? .....	45
WHAT ARE THE STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE METHODS USED TO HEAR THE VOICE OF CHILDREN WITH COMPLEX NEEDS?.....	47
CONCLUSION .....	50
<b>IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE.....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>84</b>

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to acknowledge and thank those who helped with the research and preparation of this dissertation:

Mark Jenkins, Senior Lecturer in Education, Winchester University – for his guidance throughout the journey of my dissertation

Jackie Partridge – for the opportunities she has facilitated in order to enable me to pursue personal interests and challenges

Jennifer Jackson – for her support with proofreading

Marco Belli – my husband, for his ongoing support and encouragement with my studies

## **Introduction**

This research begins from the premise that all children have a right to be listened to and should be enabled to express their views about matters that affect them. These are aspirations that have been developed across a raft of legislation since *The Children Act* (1989) to a recent draft of *The Special Needs Code of Practice: for 0 to 25 years* (2013). However, for schools working with children with complex needs, this is an extremely challenging prospect. Not only are these children limited by their cognitive and communication difficulties but they are also dependent on adults to facilitate appropriate modes of communication and to ensure that responses are interpreted correctly.

### **Aims:**

The purpose of the research is twofold. Firstly, it sets out to identify the barriers that prevent children with complex needs having their voices heard. These barriers may lie within the children themselves, in terms of understanding and communication, but may also be impacted by a range of external factors, such as task design and the role of other adults as interpreters. Secondly, it seeks to investigate the processes by which schools can elicit the views of these young people. The identification of strengths and limitations of the methods used will hopefully benefit schools in developing inclusive practices in relation to eliciting pupils' voices in the future.

### **Key questions for the research**

The following key questions will be explored:

1. *What are the barriers to hearing the voice of children with complex needs?*  
It will be necessary to identify and explore the difficulties these children experience, firstly in identifying their views and secondly in communicating them. Furthermore, the role of adults in interpreting children's responses and the problems this can create will be examined.
2. *What processes can a school use to listen to the voice of children with complex needs?*  
It will be necessary to investigate a range of methods for gathering the views of children with complex needs. This will include examining the strengths and limitations of each method and making recommendations for improving school culture in relation to consultation with pupils.

## **Research Approach**

This small scale study, presented as three case studies, was carried out with three primary aged children who are currently educated within a special school setting, as well as their parents and teachers. The use of a visual questionnaire, written observations and semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers, were used to seek the children's views on the activities they experience within school. Children were asked to demonstrate whether they liked or disliked a range of specified activities by sorting pictures onto a two way sorting board.

Attention was paid to reducing the barriers that prevent children from giving a point of view, such as the use of a visual sorting board that enabled the children to express opinions for themselves, without the need for intervention or mediation. However, despite the efforts made to ameliorate some of the factors that could reduce the authenticity of these voices, it was acknowledged that the research method would inevitably be imperfect. The resulting data could still be open to interpretation and influenced by the children's own limitations as well as the limitations imposed upon them. However, the research showed that what matters is not the need to find a set of truths as such, but to be aware of these imperfections and to develop an understanding of how these barriers can be overcome.

The research will begin by reviewing relevant literature in the area of pupil voice and examining how the views of children have been represented in education policy and government legislation. The difficulties of eliciting the voice of children with complex needs will be examined and methods that have been used evaluated. Secondly, the methodology for the research will be explained, its reliability and validity considered, and ethical issues identified. The findings from the three case studies will be presented and the methods used discussed and analysed. Finally, implications for future educational practice arising from the research will be explored.

## Literature Review

### Introduction

This chapter will explore the importance of eliciting children's views, the problems inherent in such a task and how they may be overcome. Firstly, the concept of pupil voice will be placed in its historical context, particularly in relation to developments in education and legislation. Secondly, the need for schools to find ways of hearing the voices of all children, including those with the most complex needs, will be explored. Methods currently used by researchers to listen to children will be evaluated and there will be a discussion about the problems of designing methods that are fully inclusive. Finally, method design for hearing the voice of children with complex needs will be examined and implications for school policy and practice considered.

### **How has pupil voice been represented in education policy and government legislation?**

Since 1989 there have been a number of legislations in respect of a child's right to have their voice heard. The *Children Act (1989)* strengthened children's standing in law, ensuring that they were consulted and given an equal right to express their feelings and wishes. In the same year, the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (General Assembly, 1989)* stated that children had a right to say what they thought about matters that affected their lives and to have their views taken seriously (Article 12). This required children not only to be listened to but to be actively involved in matters that affect them.

A further Children Act (2004) sought to make certain that the views of children were represented and established a Children's Commissioner to promote awareness of this issue. In 2005 the United Nations (General Comment No.7) elaborated further, stating that not only should children be able to participate in decision making about matters that affected them, but they should be empowered to do so. This meant being consulted from the earliest stages of childhood, using methods appropriate to the child's development and capacity (2005, p.7).

Such aspirations were also reflected in educational reform and policy. The revised *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (2001)* placed a greater emphasis on involving children in decisions about their education, stating that children had a unique understanding of their own needs and therefore a right to exercise choices and make decisions (2001, p.27). In 2004



*Every Child Matters* set out a national framework to support schools in listening to children. This included helping educational professionals to increase the ‘positive contribution’ children could make to society and engaging them in decision making (2004, p.9). More recently, a draft of the *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (2013)* has been put forward as work in progress. This promotes the aspiration of ‘continual listening’ in order to strengthen the voice of the individual, placing children and young people’s voices at the centre of decision making, thus giving them more choice and more control over their lives (2013,1:6).

However, despite these developments, the voice of children has not always been heard in practice. According to Davis (2000), whilst the UN convention (1989) promoted the importance of taking children’s views into account, it also provided a number of caveats that have resulted in children’s voices being overlooked. One such caveat was the requirement to take into consideration the child’s age and maturity when seeking views and this has continued to be a particularly significant factor in not hearing the voice of disabled children (2000, p.212). Indeed, Davis (2000) argues that legislation and guidance on pupil voice is often an appeal to change rather than an effective mechanism for making change a reality (2000, p.225).

Rose and Shevlin (2004) also argue that the voices of marginalised groups, including those with special educational needs, have largely been ignored. They suggest that schools have maintained an adult centred framework, leaving children on the periphery of decision making processes and subjecting them to an invisible form of exclusion (2004, p.155). This view is supported by Prunty (2012) who suggests that not only should children’s voices be heard but their perspectives should have the potential to challenge and inform educational policy and practice (2012, p.35).

### **Why is it important for all children’s voices to be heard?**

Listening to children’s voices, including those with complex needs, has significance not only for children’s autonomy but for the educational establishments they attend and for society as a whole. Furthermore, children’s insight into their own experience is beneficial for research in terms of developing an understanding of childhood.

Children not only have the capacity to communicate their views but have a right to do so. The United Nations in its *General Comment No.7* (2005) highlighted concerns that the agency of the child is often overlooked in society because of age and immaturity. However, it highlighted the importance of recognising that children are sensitive to their environment and quickly begin to understand people, places and routines, as well as developing an awareness of their own identity. Indeed, children begin to make choices and communicate their feelings, ideas and wishes long before they are able to communicate using standard conventions such as spoken language (2005, p.7). In this respect, the child's right to express their views should be embedded in the communities to which they belong and they should be able to exercise these rights progressively, according to their level of development. This is reinforced by Lewis and Porter (2007) who suggest that increased democratic participation with children can offer greater validity in reflecting their views, enabling them to contribute to the decisions that affect their lives (2007, p.222).

Hearing the voice of children has particular significance for schools, although Bearne (2002) suggests that educational practitioners often hear but don't actively listen (2002, p.122). Furthermore, Fraser (2004) suggests that if educational policy is to be grounded in reality, it is important that children are not only listened to but regarded as competent to express an opinion about their own lives (2004, p.15). This is supported by Davis (2000) who argues that children with disabilities are denied the opportunity to take responsibility for their lives, not because they are unable to make choices but because their capacity to make choices is not recognised by others (2000, p.214). Davis (2000) argues that all children are capable of having a view on matters that affect their lives, regardless of their age or maturity and practitioners need to continue to develop flexible techniques and avenues of communication to make this possible (2000, p.220).

Rose et al (1999) identifies research that indicates a number of advantages for both schools and pupils when staff listen to what children have to say. These include improvements in pupil independence and pupil-teacher relationships as well as behaviour (1999, p.206). Moreover, Fitzgerald (2003) points out that having children participate in school based enquiry can reveal new issues about a setting that could go undetected (2003, p.124).

According to Messiou (2002), the right of children to be listened to is key to developing inclusive practice within schools. Not only do children have a right to be heard, but their

perspectives can help schools improve their approaches to inclusion. Indeed, if the views of everyone are not taken seriously, then opportunities for inclusive development could be lost (2002, p.117). This is further argued by Rose and Shevlin (2004) who suggest that encouraging children to express their views can help staff to develop a greater understanding of pupil needs. This can only be beneficial in terms of developing inclusive practice within schools and making environmental changes that lead to raising standards (2004, p.156).

Education also plays a crucial role in shaping the way society perceives itself. By increasing choice for disabled pupils, other learners will also benefit and the education environment will reflect the diversity of society (*Disability Rights Commission, 2002*). As expressed by Lewis and Porter (2007), an interest in pupil voice has often been fuelled by the human rights agenda (2007, p.223). Indeed, Bolt (2004) argues that when society does not listen to the voice of disabled people, not only does it negate the potential of those who are disabled, but damages society as a whole. This is because it limits itself, representing only a proportion of the individuals who make up society and failing to represent its rich diversity (2004, p.357). Wilson (2004) argues that disabled people have much to contribute and their increased participation will improve not only their social inclusion but will benefit society in general (2004, p.162). Wilson (2004) suggests that attitudes developed at school may contribute to a society and culture that prevents successful employment and inclusion for disabled people. Furthermore, disabled children at school could learn to have low expectations about their futures and how they can contribute to society (2004, p.163).

Bearne (2002) raises the concern that the need to hear the voice of less effective learners is of huge importance but in reality they are least likely to be heard (2002, p.122). This is supported by Wilson (2004) who suggests that discrimination in school can be subtle and not necessarily intended. Furthermore, schools vary in their willingness to address barriers that prevent disabled learners from having a voice (2004, p.162). However, Prunty (2012), argues that not only can children with special educational needs reflect constructively on their school experience, but they also provide invaluable insights which are crucial for decision making in educational practice (2012, p.35). This view is supported by Costley (2000) who argues that children are 'the consumers of education' whose views are both important and illuminating for educational practice (p.165).

Not only is listening to the voice of children important for schools and society as a whole, but also has huge significance for research. Indeed the role of empirical research, as suggested by Fraser (2004), brings about 'real and measurable benefits' for children, including developing an understanding of children and how they learn (2004, p.15). Indeed, as expressed by Prunty et al (2012), in order to understand a particular phenomenon, it needs to be seen through the lens of a variety of perspectives, including children (2012, p.29). This is further supported by Robinson and Kellett (2004) who argue that if we are truly determined to find out about children's lives, we need to recognise that on the subject of childhood, children have superior knowledge (2004, p.84). Consequently, researchers have begun to find ways of including children in the research process that have benefits both for the child and the researcher. Lewis and Porter (2007) suggest that the participation of children in research is an important vehicle for developing the skills of the researcher and in increasing their understanding of the child's experiences (2007, p.222). Furthermore, Masson (2000) suggests that for researchers to neglect to listen to children is detrimental to the research process, arguing that to exclude children's voices is to undermine the validity of the insights generated from research (2000, p.34). This leads us to consider which methods are used by researchers and educational practitioners to give children a voice.

### **Which methods are used to give pupils a voice and what are their limitations?**

Traditionally, methods used to listen to the voice of children have included observation, interviews and questionnaires. However, in the last decade, there has been growing concern about the inherent power relationship between child and researcher in the context of these methods, impacting on the validity of the research and the status of the child. Recent research has therefore reflected the need to reduce these power relationships and find methods that enable children to communicate in a more meaningful way. Such developments have had particular significance for those working with children with complex learning difficulties.

In order to evaluate methods used by schools and researchers to listen to the voice of children, it is first important to explore what it means to 'listen'. Clark (2006) provides a definition of listening that identifies three important components. Firstly, listening involves active communication which involves hearing followed by the interpretation and construction of meaning. Secondly, the process of listening is not limited to the spoken word but embraces a range of verbal and non-verbal communication. Furthermore, listening is a stage in

participation that is focused on general daily routines as well as much wider decision making processes (2006, p.491). In other words, listening requires an active rather than a passive relationship that involves children and adults in discussing meanings. Clearly this has challenging implications for those who are required to listen to children with complex needs.

Robinson and Kellett (2004) raise concerns about the political difficulties inherent in research with young children, such as pre-existing power relationships within school. They argue that the adult-child power imbalance is particularly acute in schools where adults exercise control over all aspects of a child's day, including how they use their time, where they should be and how they should interact (2004, p.91). Moreover, they suggest that attempts by schools to give children a voice are largely tokenistic in character and that the views of children are ultimately disregarded in favour of the adult's superior knowledge and dominance. Such a culture clearly has implications for the researcher and how children can be best involved in research.

Robinson and Kellett (2004) outline four ways in which children are presented in research:

- i) The child is seen as an object, dependent on adults who act as their interpreters.
- ii) The child is seen as the subject, at the foreground of the research, but with the researcher determining the methodology to be used.
- iii) The child is seen as 'social actor', taking part in the research but subject to the same methodologies used for adults.
- iv) The child is seen as a participant or co-researcher, taking an active role in the process of the research. (2004, p. 85).

According to Woodhead and Faulkner (2000) power relationships in research have traditionally been weighted towards the researcher rather than the child, involving children as subjects or objects. However, more recent developments have begun to see the child more as a participant or 'social actor'. This requires researchers to be aware that power relationships can distort research processes and children's views need to be deliberately sought and accepted as valid. In this respect researchers need to structure the child's environment in order to ensure their social participation and communication (2000, p.35).

Research methods therefore need to be adapted so that they are more inclusive of children, enabling communication to take place between the child and the researcher. Fraser (2004) emphasises the importance of carrying out research ‘with’ children rather than ‘on’ children (2004, p.15). This requires methods to make sense to children, drawing on vocabulary and conceptions that are useful to the researcher but equally have meaning for the child (2004, p.24). Furthermore, Fraser (2004) argues that research with children “should involve a systematic investigation of experience” and finding out how children experience the world is a valid way of developing knowledge (2004, p.17). Indeed, engaging positively with children will improve the credibility of the knowledge that is derived (2004, p.26). This has clear implications when working with children with complex learning needs.

### **What are the specific problems associated with finding the voice of children with complex learning difficulties?**

The requirement to listen to the views of children with complex needs is obstructed by a number of challenges and can ultimately lead to the exclusion of these voices from schools and society as whole. Such challenges can firstly be seen in terms of other people’s perceptions of disabled young people and an inability to recognise the validity of these voices. For those who seek to listen, there are inherent problems associated with power relations and ethical standpoints. Furthermore, caution needs to be taken when viewing the authenticity of these young people’s voices.

Rose and Shevlin (2004) suggest that “lack of maturity and competence” are generally cited as reasons for not including young people in decision making about issues that affect their lives (2004, p.156). However, according to Veck (2009), the act of labelling children with learning difficulties can in itself create a barrier that prevents others from listening. Indeed, the consequence of not listening to children with learning difficulties leads to them becoming excluded from making their own contribution to the educational space within which they exist. In this respect, they are denied their right to equality and are therefore powerless to determine the direction of their own lives (2009, p.146).

Robinson and Kellett (2004) highlight the problems of power relations in research with children with complex learning difficulties. They argue that the capacity to perceive and exercise power is achieved through communication and as a result, empowerment is severely

diminished for these children (2004, p. 81). Furthermore, such an imbalance of power can also limit the child's capacity to give or withhold consent (2004, p.88). This is supported by Rose and Shevlin (2004) who suggest that such power relationships are rarely transparent and exclude young people from any meaningful participation. They raise concern that disabled young people can be socialised into accepting the natural order and do not even recognise forms of exclusion. Moreover, these young people do not have the resources to challenge decisions made on their behalf (2004, p.155).

Rose (1999) identifies some of the difficulties inherent in gathering a true picture of children's opinions. These include problems with communication which prevent them from expressing their opinion, as well as limitations with short and long term memory, making it difficult to recall events. However, suggestibility is also highlighted as a factor, resulting in children being led in a direction pre-determined by the teacher (1999, p.23). This is developed further by Lewis and Porter (2007) who identify the problem of imposing participation and ignoring the child's right to silence. They express concern about intruding on the private space of individuals, suggesting that silence or non response is a powerful choice that carries its own invisible message and should be respected (2007, p.224). Furthermore, they argue that it is important to ensure that collaboration is voluntary and children are not coerced into giving responses. In this respect, it is necessary to enable children to dissent at any point during the process (2007, p.225).

Lewis and Porter (2007) further explore the problem of acquiescence, where children opt to agree with a statement rather than giving a genuine response. This can be the result of a number of influencing factors. For example, the question may have been expressed in a forceful manner, the concept is too difficult for the child to evaluate, the subject has never been considered by the child before or the child may not want to express a negative view (2007, p.227). Furthermore, Lewis and Porter (2007) raise the issue that methods embraced by the researcher to support children in participating in research, can sometimes unknowingly suppress the child's voice. For example, using a facilitator to translate the child's views through signing, could lead to a distortion of the child's views where bias has been introduced or nuances of meaning have not been correctly interpreted (2007, p.226). This is reinforced by Lewis, Newton and Vials (2008) who argue that there needs to be caution surrounding the validity of views passed on by mediators. Indeed, there is a danger of children feeling pressurized to give their views, believing they have an obligation to respond

(2008, p.26). For this reason, many researchers prefer to find more inclusive ways of communicating with children directly.

### **How can problems be overcome and methods made more effective?**

Recent developments in research with young children with learning difficulties have identified a number of considerations in relation to the improvement of method design. Firstly, a much wider view of communication needs to be explored, utilising a range of inclusive tools within a child-centred environment. Secondly, children need to be taught the skills required to be able to participate effectively. Furthermore, for children with highly complex needs, the views of other stakeholders need to be considered but embraced with caution.

The requirement for inclusive tools should take into account how children communicate differently, the best conditions for engaging children in the consultative process and the range of strategies that can be used to support communication. Bolt (2004) argues that consultation with children should embrace the social model of disability that considers an individual is disabled by social attitudes and barriers, rather than the impairment itself (2004, p.353). For this reason, Wilson (2004) stresses that the methods used to enable disabled learners to participate, need to be fully inclusive, allowing all participants to have an equal opportunity to have their voice heard (2004, p.167). This is reinforced by Lewis and Porter (2007) who argue for the use of methods that are flexible, collaborative and various (2007, p.228) and Prunty (2012) who raises the need for more innovative approaches. Furthermore, Clark (2006) suggests that use of a single method can be tokenistic as well as limiting and that a mixed method approach may be more appropriate (2012, p.493).

As Clark (2006) points out, listening has traditionally been limited to the notion of verbal exchange. However, a much wider view of communication needs to be considered that includes the many different verbal and non-verbal ways in which children choose to express themselves. Furthermore, if there are many diverse ways of communicating, then there are equally many diverse ways of listening that also need to be explored (2006, p.491). In this respect, Clark suggests that there should be a shift away from the written or spoken word to a visual, more multi-sensory approach.



Robinson and Kellet (2004) highlight the need to consider the methodology design very carefully if children are to be genuine participants in the research (2004, p. 87). This requires consideration of the topic selected for research as well as the methods employed. As stated by the *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice* (2001), the methods used to encourage genuine participation by children should reflect the child's developing maturity (2001, p.28).

Lewis and Porter (2007) state the importance of selecting topics and questions for research that have meaning for the child (2007, p.223). This is reinforced by Brostrum (2012) who states that the research tools should appeal to children and give them a good experience (2012, p.265). Furthermore, Clark (2006) outlines the need to ensure that the conditions for listening to children are appropriate and supportive of the process. These would include consideration of the best time of day and the time needed to complete the task. Indeed, for some children the allocation of a familiar adult, carrying out the task in a familiar environment, may lead to a more positive encounter. Furthermore, the task itself should be varied and enjoyable and provide a choice for the child to communicate in different ways (2006, p.492).

A number of strategies have been tried by researchers to support direct communication with the child. Fitzgerald et al (2003) describe the benefits of using augmentative communication symbols such as Makaton or gestures to facilitate and enhance exchange when responding to questions (2003, p.125). Lewis and Porter (2007) have also undertaken research into asking questions, suggesting that the use of *yes* and *no* formats can encourage children who don't know the answer to give a response anyway. To eliminate this problem, they recommend the use of statements rather than questions and the use of a *don't know* option (2007, p.227). However, this can lead respondents not to make the necessary effort to make a decision or give too many options for the child to select from. In this respect, it is crucial that the child respondent has an adequate vocabulary to interpret statements or questions. This is reinforced by Long et al (2012) who suggest that children need experience of having their views listened to and therefore require access and experience of using associated vocabulary if they are to be at ease with the process (2012, p.27).

Other tools tried by researchers have included visual strategies. Research by Lewis, Newton and Vials (2008) into the use of cue cards with children highlights the importance of using visual prompts that do not give interviewers a verbal lead. They suggest the development of

systems that keep adult talk to a minimum and provide scaffolds that support responses without constraint or bias (2008, p. 27). Such strategies are also supported by Begley (2000) who suggests these systems help to reduce the power relationship between researcher and child (p.100). However, it is important that children are taught to use such systems and have the opportunity to rehearse them. Long et al (2012) highlight recent developments in using more creative methods to elicit the views of pupils such as image making. They suggest the use of techniques that place pupils at the centre of research ‘as experts in their own worlds,’ providing opportunities for children to communicate their ideas using methods other than writing and talking (2012, p.21). Fitzgerald (2003) also suggests supplementing tools so that children’s options are not restricted. This might include providing an empty recording box for children to draw their own pictures so they are not limited by pre-made images (2003, p.125).

However, as well as providing a range of inclusive tools, it is also crucial to understand that children require a level of skill in order to make an authentic response. Robinson and Kellet (2004) suggest that schools need to develop children’s ‘political literacy’ by encouraging them to actively take part in decision making about aspects of school life (2004, p.93). This requires schools to provide more than simply the opportunity for children to take part in such debate. As stated by Shevlin and Rose (2004), children require the skills to engage in decision making processes in a meaningful way and these skills need to be taught (2004, p.156). This is reinforced by Bearne (2002) who suggests that children need to be given the tools to enter into this kind of dialogue and that practitioners need to teach these skills through clear modelling (2002, p.125).

Rose (1999) highlights some of the skills of negotiation and self knowledge that are required for children to engage in participation. These include the ability to:

- engage and respond
- indicate yes or no
- identify likes and dislikes
- indicate an opinion
- indicate disagreement
- indicate personal feelings (1999, p.26).

Rose et al (1999) highlight the problem that whilst schools are often willing to actively seek out pupils’ views, they fail to recognize that pupils need to be taught the skills in order to

participate in a meaningful way (1999, p.206). Whilst augmentative communication systems such as signs and symbols can help children with severe impairments to express their needs, children also need to be taught the higher reasoning skills necessary for communication to become meaningful (1999, p.208). Furthermore, such skills need to be taught gradually to allow for children's growing development.

Whilst these skills can be taught and rehearsed, there are some children who will never acquire them. As stated by Lewis and Porter (2007) it is crucial that researchers represent the voice of all children, not simply those whose voice is more easily captured (2007, p.224). It is for this reason that some researchers prefer to use more indirect methods to gauge the child's views, such as observation. However, according to Brostrum (2012) there is a need to ensure that children's voices are also correctly understood and a faithful attempt made to interpret children's thinking and emotions. Caution therefore needs to be exercised with more indirect methods in order to ensure that observations are interpreted carefully (2012, p.265). Veck (2009) argues that researchers and practitioners need to adopt an 'attentive gaze' when listening to children. He draws the distinction between a 'disciplinary gaze' that is directed at what someone is judged or perceived to be and an 'attentive gaze' that attempts to look for what is not known; the former seeking to control and the latter seeking to understand. Veck suggests that having a voice goes beyond the ability to express oneself but extends to being listened to with attention (2009, p.152). Furthermore, he contends that those who are not listened to are subjected to an enforced passivity that makes them powerless to affect change. Indeed practitioners who endeavour to listen need to be prepared to be changed by what they hear (2009, p.148). Indeed, as Davis (2000) points out, 'sometimes listening is actually seeing' (2000, p.221).

Fitzgerald (2003) suggests that other adults who know the children well are an invaluable resource in enabling the child to feel included in the enquiry (2003, p. 129). Davis (2000) argues that what is key to disabled children being able to have their voice heard is the presence of a 'reflexive' adult. This means an adult who recognises that these children, like everyone else, are flexible and changing human beings whose behaviour, communication skills and level of interest vary from day to day and even within an activity (2000, p.213). Indeed, one has to be cautious in terms of having long term knowledge of the child as a child's preferences will change over time. This is reinforced by Messiou (2002) who states

the importance of being aware that a child can change their mind and views expressed at a given moment in time should not be relied upon (2002, p.121).

Recent research has suggested the benefits of working alongside children and placing them at the centre of research as active participants. Fitzgerald (2003) recommends a task based approach to enquiry, where the views of children are elicited by 'active participation rather than passive encounter' (2003, p.124). This is based on the principle that the child is a social agent, capable of articulating their experiences and views. Rather than imposing predefined research methods on children, such as interviews or questionnaires, the research design is built around the child, allowing for the richness of diversity.

This model of active participation in the research process is also supported by Fraser (2004) who argues that children should have the opportunity to be equal partners in the research. However, Fraser (2004) points out that equal partnership also requires the voices of other stakeholders to be heard (2004, p.25). Indeed, the *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice* (2001) places an emphasis on the partnership between teacher, child and parent. Despite this requirement, according to Goepel (2009), the participation of child and parent in making choices and decisions is not consistent in practice. Furthermore, where there is engagement with parents, schools need to consider whether they have the balance of voices right (2009, p.131). This is supported by Fitzgerald (2003) who argues that whilst the additional views of other stakeholders are relevant, they must be supplementary to children's insights, with children remaining at the centre of the enquiry (2003, p.129).

### **What are the implications of the research for future educational practice?**

The issues outlined above clearly have implications for future educational practice. This begins from the premise that children with complex needs have a right to have their voices heard and that they have the potential to do so, providing schools make engagement possible. In this respect, schools need to identify how current policy and practice can be improved, whilst recognising that change needs to be realistic within budget and time constraints. Furthermore, if listening to children is to be more than a tokenistic gesture, it should lead to real change.

The revised *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice* (2001) states that schools need to maintain a balance between encouraging children with special educational needs to make decisions about their education and not overburdening them with decisions for which they do not have adequate knowledge or experience (2001, p.27). However, as expressed by Rose (1999), if schools are to develop greater pupil involvement in decision making, they should start from the premise that children with learning difficulties have rights and abilities. In other words, they need to move away from the belief that these children are not able to make choices and decisions and begin to recognise the potential that exists within every child (1999, p.21). What is important is that processes put in place by schools actually support children to find their views and make them known.

In order to develop inclusive practice for seeking the views of children, schools should consider approaches that meet the different needs of individuals, as well as considering how to involve children actively within the research process. However, Brostrum (2012) asks for integrity when approaching research carried out with children, making the argument that when researchers provide a context for children to provide information, they are ultimately imposing their own methods upon them. In this respect, there needs to be recognition that children are not truly co-researchers since they have not been involved in planning the research process. Brostrum (2012) therefore describes the shift towards including children in the creation of the research process itself, even to the extent of formulating research questions that hold interest for them (2012, p.265).

As Clark (2006) points out, in terms of developing policy and practice, schools need to find ways of listening to children that are “participatory, adaptable, multi-method, reflexive and embedded in practice” (2006, p.502). This can involve more than simply carrying out isolated pieces of research. Indeed, Nutbrown (1996) suggests that the voice of children is best understood when adults respectfully observe them “engaged in their process of living, learning, loving and being” (1996, p.55). This highlights the importance of tuning into children whilst they carry out their normal every day activities, as well as carrying out bespoke activities that seek answers to specific research questions.

In order to develop inclusive practice further, schools need to seek a shared understanding of pupil voice that is reflected in policy and practice. As Shevlin and Rose (2004) point out, this requires confronting obstacles that stand in the way of progress and making significant

changes to attitude and procedure (2004, p.160). Rose (1999) recommends that schools begin to improve pupil participation by conducting an audit of current policy and practice. This would include:

- Clarifying current processes used to promote pupil involvement
- Identifying perceived obstacles that prevent pupil involvement
- Identifying the skills, knowledge and understanding required by pupils to express their opinions
- Providing guidance on how staff can promote future pupil involvement (1999, p.23).

As expressed by Davis (2000), this may lead to improved training for schools, ensuring that staff have the capacity to reflect on their own practice and develop the reflexive skills required to listen to children effectively (2000, p.225).

Not only do schools need to improve their capacity to hear the views of pupils but the process of listening should ultimately lead to opportunities for children to make real choices and to have an influence over matters that affect them. Rose et al (1999) highlights concern that whilst schools do actively seek out pupil views, there is often little evidence that their views have made a difference to educational practice (1999, p.206). Clark (2006) suggests that listening to children is a form of consultation that goes beyond seeking the views of children but should become a guide to action (2006, p. 491). This is also supported by Fitzgerald et al (2003) who state that children's insights should inform future practice and provision (2003, p.123). However, Lewis and Porter (2007) develop this notion further, suggesting that it is also important that children have an expectation that their views will contribute to shaping their provision (2007, p.230). This point raises its own challenges. If children should expect their views to have an impact on matters that affect them, how do schools ensure that children recognise their views have been taken seriously?

This leads to a need for realism when working within the constraints of the curriculum, timetables and school budgets. It is not realistic to think that schools can change their practice to satisfy the voices of all children. There is no perfect solution or methodology that can meet the needs of all, and it is crucial that there is transparency in identifying the difficulties. However, Messiou (2002) suggests that inclusion is about thinking of new possibilities and working towards improving participation for all. Whilst schools cannot consider the preferences of all children, they can at least be more sensitive to individual perspectives

(2002, p.121). Furthermore, it is necessary to accept from the outset that research with these young people requires a high level of commitment. As Davis (2000) reminds us, there is a need to develop avenues of communication with these young people but this takes time (2000, p.219). This is reinforced by Clark (2006) who points out that listening is time consuming, particularly when the participants are children (2006, p.500). In this respect, as Rose et al (1999) suggest, schools have to be realistic in terms of the model they choose to elicit children's views and this choice should take into account the availability of time and resources (1999, p.211).

### **The way forward**

It is clear from the above discussion that schools need to value the voices of all children, including those with the most complex needs and appropriate methods need to be embraced in order to elicit these views. However, there are problems inherent in seeking the views of children with complex needs and these barriers need to be fully identified if schools are to make improvements to current policy and practice. The above discussion therefore leads to an investigation of the two central research questions.

## **Research Approach**

### **Introduction**

There is clearly a need for all young people to have a voice, to make choices and be able to exert an influence over their environment (p. 170, Bishton and Lindsay, 2011). Such skills need to be fostered at school if young people are to be equipped to enter the adult world with a capacity to determine the direction of their lives. Whilst most schools continue to provide opportunities for pupils to express their opinions, this is a particular challenge for schools working with children with complex learning difficulties. Indeed, there is a concern that any attempts to elicit the views of these children can be superficial and tokenistic in character (Ravet, 2007, p. 235).

As highlighted by Ryan (2009), it is evident that the voices of children with special educational needs have been neglected in educational research (2009, p.78). This may be due to the problems researchers are likely to encounter, since undertaking research with children with complex needs is problematic. Detheridge (2000) explains that the diversity of this group inevitably places constraints on the researcher and the research methods that are selected (2000, p. 112). Whilst such young people may have opinions about their educational environment and the opportunities they are offered, many of them are unable to express these views in a way that can bring about meaningful change. Furthermore, as identified by Lewis and Kellett (2004), there is a danger that making considerable adaptations to the research design can lead to compromise and lack of scientific rigor (2004, p.198).

Ravet (2007) argues that the approaches and resources used to research the views of young people need to enable pupils to both find and express their perceptions (2007, p.236). This is supported by Mortimer (2004) who points out there is a need to actively listen to these children by tuning in and discovering what they would say if those listening had the skills to understand their communication (2004, p.174). For practitioners in schools it is therefore important to seek ways of listening to the voice of children by ensuring that the methods used are fully inclusive. Indeed, if the research questions are intended to help support and develop inclusive practice, then it is vital that the methods used to gather this information are equally inclusive.



Due to the individual characteristics of each child, this group does not lend itself to large scale research. Both Detheridge (2000) and Wright (2008) suggest that an interpretative approach is likely to be a more suitable method for research with these young people, leading to further understanding of how children with complex needs communicate and ultimately an improvement in practice. As suggested by Lewis and Kellett (2004), there is much to be learned from in-depth case studies of individuals using both quantitative and qualitative data to support conclusions (2004, p.195). The research will therefore adopt a mixed methods approach based on in-depth case studies of three children.

The following research was carried out at a small primary school for children with special educational needs. The school had identified pupil voice as an area for development within their school strategic plan. There was already a strong culture of listening to pupils within the school, reflected by the children's participation in self assessment, involvement in the school council and contribution to annual reviews. However, the school wanted to examine how best to ensure the voice of its more complex children was heard.

## **Methodology**

### ***Which methods were selected and why?***

The research adopted a mixed methods approach in order to meet the complex needs of the child participants. Greene (2005) argues that a mixed method approach "actively engages with difference and diversity" (2005, p.208) and therefore has the potential to bring about deeper insight. This is reinforced by Denscombe (2008) who suggests that the multi-layered dimension of the method can produce a more complete picture by combining data from complementary sources (2008, p.272). Furthermore, as expressed by Heath et al (2010), using a range of methods can help to overcome any weaknesses associated with a particular method (2010, p.5). For this reason, it was decided to employ three different approaches to data collection; an interview-administered pupil questionnaire (quantitative), pupil observation (qualitative) and semi-structured interviews with teacher and parent (quantitative and qualitative). As suggested by Heath et al (2010), it was considered that these stand alone methods would also work in conjunction with one another, allowing for triangulation and information to be easily combined (2010, p. 17).

### ***Pupil survey***

As suggested by Alerby and Kostenious (2011), questionnaires are a recognized method of enabling children to voice their experiences and attitudes (2011, p.119). However, in line with the views of Schaeffer and Presser (2003), it was important to ensure that respondents had the best chance of understanding the questions and were able to both construct and provide appropriate responses (2003, p.67). Moreover, as expressed by Alerby and Kostenius (2011), there was a need to ensure that the child participants felt listened to and therefore motivated to engage (2011, p.127). An interview-administered pupil survey was therefore selected in order to establish a relationship with the respondents, provide flexible support and facilitate further clarification where needed.

The survey was carried out with three children and repeated three times to check for consistency. This took the form of a visual questionnaire asking children for their views on school life. *Communicate in Print* software was used to create pictorial symbols to support pupils with their understanding of the questions and to make complex and abstract ideas more concrete (Ravet, 2007, p. 237). The questionnaire was set in the context of an activity, in order to meet the cognitive and linguistic abilities of the child participants and to maximize success (Ravet, 2007, p. 237).

The language difficulties of the respondents prevented them from being able to answer open questions or to make distinctions between graded categories. The pupils were therefore asked to make a forced choice between a statement pair, responding to closed questions about school life using the response statements *like* or *don't like* (Schaeffer et al, 2003, p. 76). For simplicity, the respondents were not offered a filter such as *not sure* or *sometimes*. It was felt that a choice of two categories would decrease the likelihood of respondents tending to either 'satisfice' or acquiesce (2003, p.80).

### ***Pupil observations***

Written observations of pupils were also carried out during the administration of the survey to provide additional information about how children responded and to identify any influencing factors. However, as Davis (2000) suggests, adults may place an interpretation on the child's behavior or response that is highly influenced by their own experiences and preconceptions (2000, p.224). This needs to be considered when examining the data and as such, interpretative observations need to be treated with caution.

### ***Semi-structured interviews***

As discussed by Heath et al (2010), interviews can be less structured, enabling the respondent to raise new issues or direct the interview towards more relevant ones (2010, p. 14). The information was therefore triangulated using semi-structured interviews with both staff and parents. This helped to provide further insights into the children's responses and provide comparisons.

### ***Selecting the questions***

Hallett, Hallett and McAteer (2007) point out that to increase validity it is important that children are questioned about subjects that lie within their own experience (2007, p.221). This is supported by Ravet (2007) who argues that the social context for research should reflect the children's world in terms of what they know, what they have experienced and what interests them (2007, p. 237). In order to maximise the children's interest and ensure their familiarity with the subject matter, it was decided to ask the children for their views on their experience of school.

The first issue for consideration was a concern that the selected questions would be those imposed by the researcher, immediately removing the children's opportunity to voice which subjects were of interest to them. Indeed, Porter and Lacey (2005), argue that the agenda for research should be shaped by the participants themselves (2005, p.36). This is reinforced by Alerby and Kostenius (2011) who argue that research needs to be undertaken 'with' children rather than 'on' children and participants should play a part in questionnaire construction (2011, p.127). To ameliorate this power imbalance, it was decided to ask the school council to make suggestions about the types of questions that should be included. Since the school council was made up of pupil representatives from across the school, it was felt that this would go some way towards establishing what questions may be of importance to children in the school. The member of staff responsible for facilitating the school council was therefore asked to work with class representatives to formulate a set of questions that would then be included in the questionnaire. The council came up with five questions that were added to the set of questions that had been identified by the Senior Leadership Team.

## **Trialling the method**

In order to improve the method for data gathering, a small trial of the questionnaire was carried out with twelve children across the school. This highlighted a number of issues that helped to inform the final methods selected. The limitations of the method identified within the initial trial were as follows:

- One child became distracted during the interview because he became anxious about missing assembly.
- One child returned to class and told his teacher “I said yes”. This identified concern that respondents may give answers they think the teacher wants to hear or because of a lack of understanding.
- Responses may have been impacted by the children’s difficulties in remembering information. e.g. Dance club came out as the most popular after school club. Was this because Dance Club was currently running and previous experiences had been forgotten? Pizza was popular for school dinner. Was this because the children had eaten pizza for lunch on the day of the survey?
- Initially, children were asked to select activities they liked to do at play time. This led to some children selecting all the symbols, suggesting they may have thought the task was to remove all the symbols. During the trial, the question was then altered to “Choose 3 activities you really like to do at playtime”. This supported the children in being more evaluative.

## ***How were the children selected?***

Three children were selected for in-depth case studies from three different classes across the school, including one pupil from Key Stage 1 and two pupils from Key Stage 2. Despite the difficulties in creating a homogenous group, efforts were made to select children who shared similarities (Lewis and Kellett, 2004). The children were selected by senior managers using the following criteria:

- Diagnosis of autism
- Complex learning difficulties
- Limited language
- Willingness to engage with a less familiar adult.

## **Ethical Considerations**

In order to comply with guidelines for ethical research (BERA, 2011) a number of ethical issues had to be considered in relation to carrying out research with this group of children. Firstly, it is important that participants are fully aware of the process within which they are engaged (2011, para.11, p.5). However, due to the children's learning difficulties and language limitations, they would not understand what they were being asked to take part in. For this reason it was therefore essential that parental collaboration and approval was sought before beginning the research (2011, para.18, p.7). This was gathered by an initial telephone conversation explaining the purpose of the research, supplemented by an information sheet and permission form. Furthermore, consent was sought from the Headteacher of the school.

Whilst consent was given by the parent, it was still necessary for the child to give their assent to participation in the activity. However, it is important to acknowledge that for these children it may be difficult to express dissent and their expression of dissent may not be easily recognised. It was therefore vital to monitor this carefully with teachers and supporting adults (Lewis, 2002, p.111). It was agreed that the pupil's assent to take part would be reflected by willingness to carry out the activity. Non-compliance would be taken as unwillingness or resistance to engage with the task.

Bishton and Lindsay (2011) identify the importance of a relationship of trust between the participant and the researcher (2011, p. 173). This is further supported by Ravet (2007) who talks about the need to create an 'enabling context' for research based on mutual trust that encourages the child's self expression (2007, p.237). Mortimer (2004) also raises the point that children are prepared to express their views when they feel confident and confidence is sometimes dependent on the proximity of a caring and supportive adult (2004, p.173). It was crucial therefore that every effort was made to reduce anxiety or distress for the participants (2011, para.20, p.7). It was agreed that the research activity would be carried out at the small work station outside the classroom. This was a familiar place to the children where they were used to working and provided a quiet location free from distractions. Basic Makaton signing and *Communicate in Print* symbols would be used since these would be familiar visual prompts that the children experienced as part of routine classroom activities and would hopefully enable participants to make authentic responses (2011, para.18, p.6). Furthermore, if the activity caused distress, the child would have the right to withdraw (2011, para.15, p.6).

Of course, one has to acknowledge that it is difficult to gauge how free these pupils are to withdraw, since children are generally conditioned to conform to adults' requests (Ravet, 2007, p. 240). Despite this concern, it was accepted that the interview would be terminated if the child showed any signs of not wishing to participate.

Finally, all precautions were taken to ensure the confidentiality of the data collected and the anonymity of the participants (2011, para.25, p.7). Lewis (2002) identifies the difficulties of securing confidentiality where small groups are involved and the possibility that documentation could be tracked back to specific individuals (2002, p.111). The participants were therefore given pseudonyms and no reference to the school they attended would be made in any written documentation. Furthermore, the researcher reserved the right to exclude some information from the final report if it was felt that such information could lead to the identity of an individual participant.

As Lewis (2002) states, it is widely recognised that where children are participants in research, they have a right to feedback on their contribution and on research outcomes (2002, p.112). For this group of children, limitations with receptive speech and cognitive understanding would be a barrier to providing and receiving meaningful feedback. However, it is normal practice within schools to allocate stickers to children as a way of saying thank you. It was therefore considered ethical to show appreciation of the child's time and effort by awarding a sticker for completing the activity.

### **Reliability and validity**

As identified by Lewis (2002) and Mortimer (2004), it is important that the research findings are as authentic as possible. Lewis (2002) recommends that all efforts are made to ensure that the child make an "authentic, valid and reliable response" (2002, p.114).

Mortimer (2004) points out that the methods chosen for communication must be appropriate for the child with no tendency towards bias (2004, p.170). Furthermore, Ryan (2009), argues that the context in which the research is carried out must strive to limit the cognitive and linguistic demands made on the participants (2009, p. 78).

In relation to validity, it was therefore necessary to check that responses given by the participants were interpreted fairly. Both Lewis and Kellett (2004) and Ravet (2007) raise

issues about the potential of children's responses becoming distorted. As identified by Lewis and Kellett (2004), careful consideration needs to be given to how the children's response to the task is interpreted. There may be a number of reasons why a child responds in a particular way to a task, such as inattention or lack of motivation (2004, p.197). Furthermore, as stated by Lewis (2002), the researcher needs to be aware of features that could distort the child's response e.g. classroom distractions, noise etc (2002, p.112). Ravet (2007) points out that interpretation can also be imposed by the researcher, based on the values and assumptions that they hold (2007, p. 235). To increase the reliability of the data gathered, the activity was therefore carried out at work station outside the classroom, in order to reduce distraction.

In terms of reliability, it was necessary to ensure that the responses given were typical responses that revealed what the child believes. As expressed by Ryan (2009), in order to increase reliability, it is important that views are verified systematically (2009, p. 78). Furthermore, as Taylor (2007) points out, it is important to repeat the activity in order to ensure that the responses given are those the child holds consistently rather than simply a response to how they feel at that moment (2007, p.205). The activity was therefore repeated on three separate occasions at different times to see if responses were consistent. These would then be compared with the responses of parents and teachers who would be asked to respond to the questions from the child's perspective. Hallett, Hallet and McAteer (2007) highlight the problems of attempting to reduce researcher bias by involving third parties as this can introduce yet another dimension of bias (2007, p.221). However, Mortimer (2004) argues that parents know their children best and are a helpful starting point for eliciting children's views (2004, p.170). It was felt that further information supplied by parents and teachers was justified as a means of correlation, provided the children's responses remained unaltered.

Lewis (2002) and Ravet (2007) raise issues in terms of the power relationship between the researcher and the child participant which can affect reliability. Ravet (2007) argues for the need to reduce the authority of the researcher by seeking clarification when meaning is not clear and triangulating perceptions (2007, p.237). Furthermore, as Lewis (2002) points out, the use of a question and answer format can create a power relationship, giving the adult asking the questions a higher status (2002, p. 113). Children can become inhibited by certain types of questioning and sometimes have a bias towards giving responses they think the adult wants to hear. According to Ravet (2007) younger children often struggle with open ended

questions and give poor quality responses (2007, p.238). This is supported by Taylor (2007) who advocates the use of closed questions that do not require explanation or abstract responses (2007, p. 207). In an effort to ameliorate these issues, it was decided not to use a question and answer structure but to ask the children to sort activities into two categories, *like* and *don't like*.

Bishton and Lindsay (2011) state it is important to check that the participants understand the concepts involved in the process (2011, p. 173). This is further supported by Hallett, Hallett and McAteer (2007) who stress the importance of ensuring that participants are fully able to conceptualise the questions being asked (2007, p. 221). In this case it was important that the children would understand the concept of *like* and *not like* and be able to demonstrate their viewpoint. In order to support the children in expressing their views, the activity would begin with practice questions, clearly modelled by the researcher, demonstrating that responses could be either *like* or *not like*. As suggested by Taylor (2007), the medium of food was used to model how to show preferences, as eating is a concrete and sensory experience that children are likely to relate to the concepts of like and dislike (2007, p. 206). Furthermore, a puppet was used to model responses and to encourage the children to share their own responses (Lewis et al, 2005). The actual questions would not begin until the researcher felt the child understood the task. As highlighted by Ravet (2007) and Alerby et al (2011), this also helped to model to the child participants that there were no correct answers and either response was acceptable.

Harper (2002) points out the usefulness of using visual images in this type of research since images tap more deeply into the human consciousness than words and utilize more of the brain's processing power (2002, p.13). Indeed, Taylor (2007) suggests that picture symbols are a powerful tool, provided the participant understands the meaning of the symbols, the options presented and the process (2007, p.204). Familiar picture symbols were therefore used in order to support the children in understanding the questions (p. 63, Lewis et al, 2005). During the trial, children in the sample group showed the tendency to change the topic of conversation when a different idea came into their heads. The symbols therefore also served as a visual reference tool and helped to remind the children about the focus of the activity (Bishton and Lindsay, 2011, p. 175.)



Finally, an important component of the research was to make observations of the children as they undertook the activity. Mortimer (2004) argues that observation is a key factor in enabling the practitioner to record children's responses in objective terms (2004, p.172). For this reason it was important to tune into the children's responses to the activity in order to interpret simple reactions, expressions and emotions.

In terms of methodological approach, it is important to recognise that the methods selected will not be perfect. As Ravet (2007) suggests, to embrace an interpretative approach to research is to accept that it is not necessary to seek or make claims about truth but to recognise that the researcher will inevitably influence the construction of the realities being considered (2007, p.236). Indeed, the focus of the research shifts from an attempt to gather information where children are treated as 'objects' and to move towards empowering children by regarding them as 'subjects' (2007, p. 236). This drives the approach to the methodology that has been outlined.

## Findings

### Introduction

This chapter will initially summarise the results for each of the three case studies in turn and draw attention to any significant findings. The data collated for each pupil has been included in the Appendices. These include:

- A visual questionnaire completed with the child using a sorting board and pictorial symbols.
- Observation notes on how the child responded to the task.
- A semi-structured interview completed with the parent.
- A semi-structured interview completed with the class teacher.

Subsequently, the results will be examined in relation to the key research questions:

- What are the barriers to hearing the voices of the three children described in the case studies?
- What are the strengths and limitations of the methods used as revealed by the case studies?

### The Case Studies

#### Case Study 1: Amy

##### *Visual questionnaire (Appendix i)*

At the first session, Amy expressed satisfaction for all twenty of the school activities presented to her. It was therefore not clear whether she was tending to acquiesce and give responses she perceived the adult would want to hear. During the subsequent sessions, however, Amy made it clear that she did not like all types of snack, indicating on the second session she didn't like crackers and on the third session she didn't like apricots. This may indicate that Amy understood the concept of *like* and *dislike* and was giving an authentic response to the question. However, it is not clear why Amy would give different responses on different days and this raises a number of questions:

- Does Amy's general satisfaction with the majority of school activities suggest her need to give positive responses or does it suggest that she is in fact generally satisfied?
- Is Amy expressing that she felt differently about snack choices on different days?
- Is Amy giving a response based on recent experience e.g. she had not been offered crackers or apricots on these days and these items were at the forefront of her mind?

*Observation notes (Appendix ii)*

Amy demonstrated a willingness to engage in the activity and was able to maintain attention for the duration of the task. Interruption of the task by the fire alarm and subsequent evacuation of the building did not appear to faze her and she seemed happy to continue. Her use of Makaton signs throughout the activity suggested that she understood the meaning of most picture symbols although it was not clear that she recognized the symbol for the Multi Sensory Room and After School Club. Amy did not copy the responses modeled by the puppet, suggesting that she was giving authentic responses of her own. In general, Amy did not hesitate over her responses, other than some hesitation when responding to snack preferences.

Written observations of Amy during the activity raise the following questions:

- Does Amy's overall lack of hesitancy suggest an assured clarity in her responses or rather impulsivity and lack of ability to consider a response?
- Does Amy's overall recognition of the picture symbols necessarily imply understanding of the question or the concept of identifying her preferences?
- Does Amy's easy compliance with the routine of the task and its familiarity suggest that her capacity to reflect on responses could have become reduced over time?

*Semi-structured interview completed with parent (Appendix iii)*

A semi-structured interview was carried out with Amy's mother. The detail of her answers suggested an in-depth knowledge of Amy's preferences, based on Amy's behaviour and communication at home, as well as observation of Amy within the school environment. The parent's responses confirmed that Amy liked all twenty of the activities presented on the picture symbols. Like Amy, she did not hesitate in her responses which were all highly positive. However, she was able to provide an additional layer of detail that Amy was not able to provide, such as stating that Amy liked to play her instruments at half past five in the morning! Her response to the question about snack preferences did not shed any light on why Amy would give different responses on different days. However, she emphasised that Amy liked healthy snacks and would choose banana over chocolate.

The interview with Amy's mother raises the following questions:

- Could a perceived power relationship between parent and teacher-researcher influence the responses given by the parent e.g. the parent giving a response they feel would be valued by society, such as the value of eating healthy snacks?
- Could the parent's views be influenced by the professionals who look after their child e.g. being told by the teacher that Amy falls asleep in the Multi Sensory Room?
- Could the parent feel obliged to show knowledge of their child and therefore be reluctant to respond with *not sure*?

*Semi-structured interview completed with class teacher (Appendix iv)*

The class teacher's responses to the questions differed significantly from Amy's own responses and those of Amy's mother. Whereas Amy's mother stated without hesitation that her daughter liked all the school activities, the class teacher responded to six questions with *not sure*. Furthermore, the class teacher sometimes found it difficult to choose between *like*, *doesn't like* and *not sure* and offered the alternative *so-so* for four of the questions. Like Amy's mother, the class teacher provided a layer of detail that Amy would not be able to provide, such as stating that Amy was being more assertive at playtime.

The interview with Amy's class teacher raises the following questions:

- How does the teacher's perspective on the child influence their views about the child's preferences?
- Is the teacher more willing than the parent to state *don't know* and if so why?
- Has the teacher imposed their own interpretation on the child's behaviour e.g. suggesting that the child is 'not really bothered' by balls rather than considering that the child finds balls difficult to control?

*Summary of Case Study 1*

In summary, Amy's extremely positive views about school activities are supported by the parent and partly by the teacher. This would suggest that Amy was able to access the task in the form it was presented, understood what was asked of her and was able to give authentic responses. The addition of the views of adult respondents to the case study provides an interesting layer of detail that Amy herself is unable to provide. However, it is clear that these additional perspectives need to be viewed with caution and considered as secondary evidence, providing only some tentative insights into the child's responses. The differences in

the data between the different perspectives highlight the importance of attempting to identify the child's views first-hand, by providing an activity that is accessible to the child.

### Case Study 2: Colin

#### *Visual questionnaire (Appendix v)*

Colin indicated satisfaction with 17 out of 20 activities in all three sessions. However, he responded differently to the question about snack choices, indicating that he didn't like breadstick, rice cake, cracker and apple in the first session, adding banana to his list of snacks he didn't like in the second session and then indicating he liked all the snacks in the third session. In two out of three sessions he expressed he did not like after school clubs and on one occasion he indicated he did not like the Multi Sensory Room. His overall consistency for showing satisfaction with school activities, balanced with some negative responses for three questions, suggests that Colin understood the concept of *like* and *don't like* and was therefore giving authentic answers. However, it was not clear at the time of the activity, why Colin would give different responses on different days. This raises the following questions:

- Why does Colin show different snack preferences on different days?
- What factors influence Colin to give different responses on different days?
- Does Colin give a response based on recent experience e.g. he remembers having eaten specific snacks on these particular days?

#### *Observation notes (Appendix vi)*

Colin was willing to engage in the activity and use of the puppet appeared to motivate him at first. However, it soon became clear that the puppet may have created confusion for Colin and prevented him from giving authentic responses. In relation to the question about snacks, he appeared to imitate the responses given by the puppet and copied an alternating pattern that had been inadvertently modelled (*like-not like-like-not like*). Furthermore, Colin wanted to play with the puppet, rather than attend to the task and kept repeating the words "Tell Tom [the puppet]." Colin needed to be reminded that he had to give his own responses to the questions and eventually the puppet was put away to reduce distraction.

After returning Colin to class at the end of the first session, a Teaching Assistant who had been listening to the activity, stopped me to say that although Colin had indicated he didn't like apple or cracker, he always ate them at snack time. In other words, he was questioning

the validity of Colin's response based on his own observations during snack time. However, during the second session Colin indicated again that he did not like apple or cracker, suggesting that this may have been an authentic response to the question.

Colin's response to the task in the second session was unexpected. Each time he was presented with a picture symbol he placed it on the *don't like* board and said 'no more', resulting in all the pictures being placed on the *don't like* board. After remodeling the task, Colin again placed the picture symbols on the *don't like* board but then took them all off and placed them on the *like* board. Similar behaviour was repeated in the third session with Colin trying to turn the *don't like* board over and saying "I don't want - no more." His behaviour was difficult to interpret and it was not clear whether Colin was playing a game or whether his behaviour was communicating something significant about how he felt.

These observations raise the following questions:

- How does use of a puppet add confusion to the task for Colin?
- Does Colin's willingness to eat a snack necessarily imply that he also likes the snack?
- Can the researcher be certain that Colin understands the task and is giving a freely chosen, authentic response?
- How do Colin's emotions influence his response to the task?

#### *Semi-structured interview completed with parent (Appendix vii)*

A semi-structured interview was carried out with Colin's mother and step-father and shed some light on Colin's response to the task. There were differences between their responses and those of Colin. They responded with *don't like* for balls which contrasted with Colin's response which was consistently positive for this question. In response to the questions about school dinners, school uniform and scooters, they stated they were *not sure*; a further difference with Colin's responses which were consistently positive for all three. Some of their responses seemed to be dependent on their interpretation of the language used and were clearly interpretative. For example, they stated that Colin did not like balls because he didn't 'play' with them. For Colin's parents, their observation that he liked to 'hold' balls rather than 'throw' them did not constitute 'play'. Furthermore, they gave clear insight into Colin's playful personality, stating that Colin liked to play games and would often give the wrong answer as a joke. This could partly explain Colin's response to the puppet but also suggests that his responses may not be reliable. The parent interview raises the following questions:

- How does the parents' interpretation of the question influence their response?
- How can Colin be encouraged to give an authentic response?

*Semi-structured interview completed with class teacher (Appendix viii)*

The class teacher gave further insight into Colin's behaviour during the activity. Her responses differed from Colin's, stating that he didn't like scooters and she was not sure whether he liked school uniform, although Colin's responses for these two questions had been consistently positive. However, she informed me that he had recently become very negative about school and the class team had introduced a 'Happy Chart' where Colin was able to earn a smiley face for positive behaviour. This could partly explain Colin's response to the activity and his need to turn over the *don't like* board and say "I don't want - no more." Indeed, Colin may have been communicating that he was no longer focusing on negative responses but concentrating on being positive. The teacher interview raises the following questions:

- What is the communicative function of Colin's response to the task?
- How does the teacher's contextual knowledge of Colin help to interpret Colin's responses?

*Summary of Case Study 2*

Out of the three children who took part, Colin was the least consistent in his responses. He was highly sensitive to what was happening around him and his responses were clearly influenced by his emotions at the time. Furthermore, his sense of humour and capacity to have fun with adults, made it difficult to identify whether his responses were consistently authentic. In Colin's case, use of the puppet may have been a distraction, leading Colin to see the activity as 'a game of pretend' or role play and therefore not expected to give serious responses. His need to turn over the *don't like* board and say 'no more' may have reflected his personal target to be more positive in order to earn smiley faces, rather an expression of his views.

### Case Study 3: Maggie

#### *Visual questionnaire (Appendix ix)*

Maggie's responses were consistently positive other than one anomaly during the first session when she indicated that she *didn't like* scooters. It was therefore not clear if she understood the task and the concept of choosing between *like* and *don't like*. Furthermore, there was a possibility that Maggie was tending towards acquiescence and giving responses she perceived the adult would want to hear. Maggie's response to the visual questionnaire raises the following questions:

- Are Maggie's responses an authentic reflection of her views?
- Does Maggie understand the task?
- Does Maggie place a value on saying that she likes something?

#### *Observation notes (Appendix x)*

Maggie appeared happy to engage with the activity. Initially, she seemed to find some of the symbols difficult to interpret e.g. thinking that the picture symbol for *friends* meant *playing*. However, secondary questioning confirmed that she recognized and understood the meaning of the symbols. Despite her largely positive responses to each question, Maggie demonstrated much hesitation during the task. On a number of questions she initially indicated *don't like* but then changed her mind. When the question was repeated as a way of checking she was happy with her response, Maggie sometimes gave a different response. This suggested that repetition of the question gave Maggie the impression that her first answer was incorrect. Despite the fact the puppet had modeled giving *don't like* as a response, it was not clear whether Maggie perceived that *like* was the 'correct' response. The observation raises the following questions:

- Does Maggie's hesitation reveal lack of certainty about the task?
- Does Maggie believe that the task requires a 'right' answer?
- Does Maggie understand the meaning of giving her point of view?

#### *Semi-structured interview completed with parent (Appendix xi)*

A semi-structured interview was carried out with Maggie's mother. Her responses correlated with Maggie's responses in sixteen out of twenty questions. However, in response to the questions about school uniform and the Multi Sensory Room, Maggie's mother stated that her daughter did *not like* them. In response to the questions about snack foods and balls, she



stated that she was *not sure*. It is clear that Maggie's mother uses interpretation of her daughter's behaviour to indicate a preference. For example, she interprets her daughter's need to take off her uniform after school as an indication that Maggie does not like school uniform, rather than an expression of Maggie's understanding that school is finished for the day. Furthermore, she interprets Maggie's decision not to choose the Multi Sensory Room at *Saturday Fun Club* as an indication that Maggie does not like this activity. The parent questionnaire raises the following questions:

- Is the interpretation of Maggie's behaviour reliable?
- Does interpretation of Maggie's behaviour support or limit an understanding of her responses?

*Semi-structured interview completed with class teacher (Appendix xii)*

The class teacher's responses correlated with Maggie's in eighteen out of twenty questions. However, she gave a response of *not sure* in response to the questions about trips out on the minibus and playing with balls. These responses were based on her interpretation of Maggie's behaviour. For example, she noted that Maggie did not generally choose to play with balls and was therefore unsure whether Maggie liked balls or not. This would seem to be a reasonable interpretation of Maggie's behaviour in this context. However, her *not sure* response in relation to trips out on the minibus was based on the fact she was aware that Maggie had had problems on a school trip in the previous year. In this instance, her response was based on information she had heard rather than what she had observed. Indeed, there is no further information about why Maggie had a problem on the previous school trip and whether this was related to school trips in general or a response to a specific situation. The teacher interview raises the following questions:

- How does historical information gained from other members of staff influence the teacher's responses?
- How reliable is the teacher's interpretation of Maggie's behaviour?

*Summary of Case Study 3*

In summary, Maggie's hesitation during the activity raised concerns about whether she fully understood the task or whether she had a tendency to acquiesce. Furthermore, Maggie may have perceived there was a right and a wrong answer and did not understand the freedom of giving a point of view. Moreover, interpretation of Maggie's behaviour may be influenced by

historical information as well as current observed behaviour and should therefore be viewed with caution.

**What are the barriers to hearing the voices of the three children described in the case studies?**

The case studies highlight a number of difficulties both in terms of enabling the children to give a point of view and in helping them to communicate it. These barriers are influenced by the child's personality, their understanding of the task and the concepts involved, their skills in making choices and their emotional well being at the time of the activity.

Despite the fact that all three children were able to engage in the activity, it was evident that the child's personality and emotional well being influenced the outcomes. Whilst Amy and Maggie complied easily with the task and followed the instructions as requested, Colin's response was less compliant. He became highly focused on the puppet, made choices then changed his mind and tried to turn the *don't like* board over. Certainly, his parents confirmed that Colin had a sense of humour and this may have resulted in him treating the activity as a game, rather than a serious attempt to ascertain his views. However, it was also possible that Colin's responses reflected anxiety about choosing negative responses and were influenced by his target of being positive.

The responses of Amy and Maggie suggest general satisfaction with school activities which are largely confirmed through the parent interviews. However, it is difficult to be certain that these responses reflect an authentic view rather than a child's tendency to acquiesce. Indeed, the positive responses provided by both Amy and Maggie may indicate a need to please adults by stating that they like all the school activities, therefore providing responses they think the adult wants to hear. Furthermore, Maggie's responses could indicate a lack of understanding about the task or that she places a value on giving a positive response. Amy's lack of hesitancy may also be significant. On one hand her ability to give quick responses could indicate that she understands the task and has a clear point of view. On the other hand, her lack of hesitancy could indicate impulsivity and therefore inability to reflect and make a considered decision.

It is interesting that whilst all three children gave largely consistent responses across all three sessions, there were some anomalies. Both Colin and Amy, for example, specified a preference for different snacks on different days. This leads us to consider what the children are communicating through their responses and what influences their lack of consistency. It may suggest that the children have long term memory difficulties and are responding to recent experiences. However, it may also indicate that the children are unable to generalize a point of view and their responses reflect their opinion at a moment in time, rather than a view generated over a longer period.

### **What are the strengths and limitations of the methods used as revealed by the case studies?**

The case studies reveal a number of strengths and limitations in relation to methodology design. These relate to the conditions for the activity, the task itself, as well as the system used for recording data. Furthermore, caution needs to be exercised where adults provide interpretations of children's behaviour.

In general, all three children appeared happy to engage with the task and showed no signs of anxiety or frustration. It was clear that they were used to doing this type of activity and did not appear to be concerned about working with a less familiar adult outside the classroom or working on the activity at different times of day. This would suggest that the conditions for the activity were appropriate and conducive to the collection of data. Indeed, even the distraction of an unexpected fire evacuation practice did not prevent Amy from returning to the activity afterwards.

The use of picture symbols appeared to support the children in accessing the task. The symbols were mostly familiar to the respondents and their response to further questioning and use of Makaton signs indicated they generally recognized the symbols and understood their meaning. However, the initial difficulty experienced by Amy and Maggie in interpreting the symbols for *Multi Sensory Room*, *After School Club* and *friends* demonstrated the need for the respondents to be familiar with all the symbols and particularly with those symbols that attempted to illustrate more abstract concepts such as friendship.

The design of the sorting boards to illustrate *like* and *don't like* was a kinaesthetic activity that helped to motivate and engage the children actively in the task and was an activity type with which the children were clearly familiar. However, the recognition and placing of the picture symbols did not necessarily imply that the children understood the concept of *like* and *dislike* and were able to give a point of view. Indeed, Amy's general satisfaction with all the activities may suggest that she did not understand the task or was unable to express a preference. Furthermore, Maggie's hesitant responses may suggest difficulty in making choices, a need to give the adult positive responses or even a belief that the researcher was looking for a 'right' answer.

It was apparent from the compliant way in which the children responded to the task, that the puppet was a useful and motivating tool, enabling the adult to model to the children what was required. Whilst observing the choices made by the puppet, Amy did not attempt to copy them, suggesting that she was giving her own responses to the questions. However, for Colin, the puppet seemed to add confusion and distracted him from the seriousness of the task. Furthermore, it was possible that Colin was attempting to copy the choices of the puppet or was unable to distinguish between his own viewpoint and that of the puppet. In this respect, the puppet proved a useful tool for some children but not for others.

The case studies also highlight some interesting issues in relation to questions and answers. For Colin, a value was placed on giving positive responses when he responded with "I don't like – no more." As a result of his personal target to focus on being positive about school, Colin may have felt that it was important to please the adults by saying he liked the activities, rather than giving a true indication of how he felt. For Maggie, the repetition of a question sometimes resulted in her changing her response. This may be the result of her past experience of answering questions posed by adults, leading her to falsely believe that questions always have a right or a wrong answer.

In terms of data collection, limiting the children to a choice of two categories (*like* and *not like*) ensured that all the questions were answered. Despite the hesitation displayed by Colin and Maggie, all the children were able to work through the activity and indicate a response. Allowing the adults the opportunity to make further comments, offered a layer of detail the children themselves would not be able to provide. Whilst the responses of the parents confirmed the majority of the children's responses, for Colin and Maggie there were

differences that did not match. This could be the result of not having observed the child within the school context or the child behaving differently at home to at school. For Amy's class teacher, it was difficult to choose between the categories of *like*, *not like* and *not sure*. This led to the teacher feeling the need to create a further category (*so-so*), enabling her to make a midpoint judgement quite distinct from stating lack of certainty.

It is important to be aware that adult responses were often an interpretation of the child's behaviour rather than factual. Such interpretation, whilst informed by observation in some cases, may be impacted by a range of influences. Of course, parental responses may be partial conjecture as the parent does not usually observe the child within the school environment. A child's behaviour can also appear different at school than at home, possibly as a result of different expectations on the part of the adults. Certainly, the child's previous history as described and interpreted by other adults could also influence a response, such as Maggie's teacher suggesting she may not like trips out on the minibus. Furthermore, the role of the teacher-researcher and the perceived power-relationship between parent and teacher, could influence responses given by the parent. Indeed, parental responses may be influenced by the need to provide information that is socially acceptable or valued by society and there could be a reluctance to admit lack of knowledge about a child's preferences.

In conclusion, the mixed method approach to this data gathering provides a range of complementary perspectives that create a layer of insight into the voice and viewpoints of these three case studies. It is clear that whilst the design method goes some way to ensuring accessibility for the children and authenticity of their responses, it is apparent that barriers remain. For these three children, their emotional well being and cognitive abilities still impact on their capacity to give a view. Furthermore, there is an extent to which children's responses may be influenced by the presence of the practitioner-researcher. Finally, whilst other adults provide additional information that generally corresponds with the children's views, differences in the responses are a reminder that adult voices only provide an interpretation. In this respect, they highlight the necessity of eliciting the children's views first hand. Moreover, they identify the need for adults to listen to children continually and reflexively, with recognition and understanding that their views may change over time.

## **Analysis and discussion**

### **Introduction**

This chapter will consider the research questions set out at the beginning of the study and examined within the statement of results. It will discuss how the data reflects existing knowledge of how schools enable children with complex needs to make their voices heard, as portrayed in the literature. Deficiencies in the research design will be examined and more appropriate approaches will be considered.

### **What are the barriers to hearing the voice of children with complex needs?**

The case studies clearly reflect the barriers experienced by children with complex needs in making their voices heard. The following analysis shows how these barriers can be seen in terms of the competencies of the children themselves, the methods used to elicit their views and the role of adults within the process.

It is clear from the data generated by the case studies that the children's limited communication and cognitive difficulties may have created an initial barrier to accessing the task and responding with authenticity. Indeed, the evidence suggests that the child respondents may have been subject to suggestibility (Rose, 1999) or inclined towards acquiescence (Lewis and Porter, 2007). For example, Maggie's responses were largely positive, other than one anomaly and she tended to change her response if the question was repeated. Furthermore, the children may not have had the appropriate skills to engage in the decision making process in a meaningful way, either in terms of understanding language concepts or in exercising choice (Lewis and Kellett, 2004; Shevlin and Rose, 2004; Hallett et al, 2007). Indeed, it was not clear whether Colin was able to distinguish between his own viewpoint and that of the puppet.

However, the overall level of consistency in the responses provided by the children (Taylor, 2007), largely corroborated by parents and teachers, suggest that children with complex needs do have the capacity to express their views and to make personal choices. Indeed, children have a unique understanding of their own needs (*Special Educational Needs Code of Practice*, 2001) and are able to make choices and communicate their feelings and ideas long before they are able to use spoken language (*United Nations, General Comment*). Moreover,

children are not only competent to express an opinion about their own lives (Fraser, 2004) but also have superior knowledge about their own lives (Robinson and Kellett, 2004).

Data generated from the case studies also reflects the difficulties for practitioners in developing methods that are both flexible and fully inclusive. It is not clear from the data whether all the children were sufficiently proficient in the skills required to provide consistently authentic responses, such as recognizing associated vocabulary, understanding concepts (Bishton and Lindsay, 2011), or being able to give a view point (Long et al, 2012). Indeed, children need to be taught these skills (Shevlin and Rose, 2004) and allowed the opportunity to rehearse them (Lewis, Newton and Vials, 2008). However, it was evident by the confident way in which the children approached the task, that the activity and subject matter were appropriate and did not place unrealistic cognitive and linguistic demands on the participants (Mortimer, 2004; Ryan, 2009). If children are to be genuine participants then the subject matter needs to have equal meaning for both researcher and the child (Robinson and Kellett, 2004; Fraser, 2004; Lewis and Porter, 2007). Furthermore, the tools selected should be appealing (Alerby and Kostensius, 2011; Brostrum, 2012) and make communication possible (Davis, 2000). Indeed, data generated from the case studies suggest that when inclusive methods are developed to enable children to communicate, then children with complex needs are able to communicate both authentically and independently.

The research data also suggests that supporting adults, including parents, teachers and researchers, can both explain as well as distort children's communication through interpretation. For children with complex needs and limited communication abilities, other adults are an invaluable resource and can provide an additional perspective on children's behaviour (Prunty, 2012). Within the case studies, other adults provided a layer of detail that the children were not able to provide (Greene, 2005). This was particularly significant for Colin whose parents and teacher were able to shed light on his responses and unusual approach to the task. However, researchers have to be aware that such additional perspectives, influenced by personal experience and preconceptions, can also distort meaning (Davis, 2000; Ravet, 2007). For example, it is not certain that Amy's reluctance to choose balls at playtime indicated her difficulty in handling a ball rather than the lack of interest suggested by her teacher. Indeed, if listening involves the components of hearing, interpretation and construction of meaning (Clark, 2006), then it is crucial that a faithful attempt is made to interpret children's thinking and emotions and observations are interpreted carefully (Brostrum, 2012).

Furthermore, there is an inherent power relationship between the adult and the child (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2000) that can lead to the child being seen as an object, dependent on the adult who acts as their interpreter (Robinson and Kellett, 2004). In this respect it is important to be cautious where adults have long term knowledge of the child since children's preferences and feelings can change over time, or indeed on a daily basis (Davis, 2000; Messiou, 2002). In Maggie's case, a previous incident on a school trip led her teacher to be unsure whether or not Maggie liked going out on the minibus. Moreover, there may also have been a subconscious power relationship between parent and teacher-researcher that influenced the parent's responses, such as Amy's mother commenting that her daughter would choose a healthy snack over an unhealthy one.

Another point relating to the role of adults in the research process is the adult framework within which the research was set. Despite efforts to use some questions formulated by the School Council, the selected methods and questions were largely imposed by the teacher-researcher and in this respect the child's power in the research process was limited (Brostrum, 2012).

To sum up, whilst it is important to allow the voices of other stakeholders to be heard (Fraser, 2004), it is paramount that the child's responses remain at the centre of enquiry (Fitzgerald, 2003). In this respect, the visual questionnaires completed with the children remain at the forefront of the study. Indeed, the children's largely consistent responses over three sessions would suggest that their responses were largely authentic.

### **What are the strengths and limitations of the methods used to hear the voice of children with complex needs?**

The research revealed a number of strengths in terms of its design that the school can build on in order to improve the processes by which children are given a voice. The children indicated a willingness to engage with the activity as well as overall enjoyment of the task (Lewis, 2002). Indeed, the children's largely positive approach may have been influenced by the choice of subject (school activities) that had meaning and appeal for them (Hallett et al, 2007; Ravet, 2007), the interactive and multi-sensory dimension of the task, enabling them to be actively involved (Ravet, 2007) and use of picture symbols that provided support with language and communication difficulties (Harper, 2002; Lewis et al, 2005; Taylor, 2007).



Furthermore, the inclusion of adult perspectives also gave parents and teachers a voice, strengthening their partnership and providing interesting insights into their relationships with the child and interpretations of the child's behaviour (Denscombe, 2008; Heath et al, 2010).

However, more significant is the fact that the children were able to indicate a viewpoint for themselves, without the need for adult intervention or mediation. This means that the children's own views remain at the forefront of the research, providing a powerful insight into the child's world and experiences. In this respect, the research provides strong evidence that children with complex learning difficulties have the capacity to express a view and can do so independently, providing the tools that are used are appropriate and flexible.

The data also raises a number of deficiencies within the research design that the school can address in order to improve the processes by which it strives to give children a voice. These are reflected in the questions that were generated from the case studies, as described in the statement of results.

Firstly, more attention could be paid to reducing the effect of power relationships between the parent and teacher-researcher. Whilst the children were given clear instructions about the task and the puppet used to model choices, it is possible that the parents were not provided the same level of support or clarity. It would not be possible to eliminate this power relationship entirely, but by providing clearer guidance at the start of the interview, such as assuring the parent that no judgements would be made, may help to reduce its effect.

Secondly, whilst the task design supported accessibility and allowed the children the opportunity to express a view, it could be argued that in some ways it unknowingly suppressed the child's voice (Lewis and Porter, 2007). Indeed, its rigidity in providing picture symbols that the children were asked to sort, may have prevented the respondents from providing further information. This may have been improved by offering a more flexible, collaborative approach and varied avenues of communication (Davis, 2000; Lewis and Porter, 2007), with individual children choosing their preferred form of communication or learning style and the opportunity to provide additional detail if willing and able (Clark, 2006). Furthermore, rather than limiting the picture symbols to those selected by the adult-researcher, it may have been appropriate to provide empty boxes for the children to add their own symbols (Fitzgerald, 2003).

A further deficiency in the research design relates to the role of the child respondents, both in terms of their involvement in the design of the research questions and their capacity to receive feedback. Whilst an effort was made to engage the school council in formulating some of the questions, it was not possible to fully involve the children in this aspect of the research design. This was largely due to the children's cognitive difficulties in relation to understanding the concept of a pupil survey and being able to identify appropriate activities for sorting. In reality, the children therefore remained on the periphery of the decision making process, contributing to what was essentially an adult centred framework (Rose and Shevlin, 2004). However, with more time, it may have been possible to carry out an initial survey of what children liked about school in order to draw up a list of suitable activities for sorting. This may have gone some way towards placing the children at the foreground of the research as active participants or even as co-researchers (Robinson and Kellett, 2004) and facilitating their participation in shaping the agenda (Porter and Lacey, 2005) by allowing them to formulate research questions that hold interest for them (Alerby and Kostensius, 2011; Brostrum, 2012).

The research also raises a number of issues that could inform future improvements to school practice. The research method does not address the need for children to receive feedback on the results of the survey or to demonstrate to the child respondents how their views could impact on school policy and practice (Lewis, 2002; Bishton and Lindsay, 2011). Whilst the children were thanked for taking part in the survey by means of a sticker, no attempt was made to summarize their views or describe overall findings to them. In this respect, listening was a passive rather than an active relationship that did not embrace children and adults in discussing meanings (Clark, 2006). Indeed, the small scale nature of the study was intended to find out how to give children with complex learning difficulties a voice, rather than to show children how their voice could lead to changes in their environment. The research therefore demonstrates appropriate strategies for schools to elicit the views of their young pupils. However, it also leads to consideration of how schools can firstly feedback findings to children and secondly, how schools can use this information to affect change. Indeed, not only do children's voices need to be heard but they should have an expectation that their perspectives could help to shape provision (Lewis and Porter, 2007) and inform educational policy and practice (Rose, 1999; Prunty, 2012). In this respect, more thought needs to be given to ensuring that children's views are taken seriously, if the challenges set by the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (General Assembly, 1989)* are to be met.

A further improvement to the processes used by schools to elicit the views of children lies with the need for ‘continual listening’ (*Special Educational Needs Code of Practice, indicative draft, accessed 2013*). Whilst stand alone surveys have their place in terms of collecting data for school improvement, their limitations cannot replace the requirement for schools to listen to children over time. As reflected by the data generated from the case studies, small differences in preferences indicated by the children over the period of three sessions, is a reminder that children’s views do change, not only over weeks but over hours and days. For example, Colin’s responses were highly inconsistent and not always corroborated by parents or teaching staff. In this respect, it is crucial that schools find systems for listening to children on a regular basis, by tuning into children whilst they engage in their normal everyday activities (Nutbrown, 1996; Mortimer, 2004) and by being aware of non-verbal forms of communication (Clark, 2006). This is expressed beautifully by Veck (2009) who reminds us of the diverse ways in which it is possible to listen and the need to adopt an ‘attentive gaze’ as a way of looking for what is not known.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, the research reflects current existing knowledge on the barriers that prevent children with complex learning difficulties from having their voices heard and the processes by which schools can listen to children’s views. Deficiencies in the design highlight the difficulties of helping such children to identify a personal view and then communicate that view to another person. These would include suggestibility and acquiescence (Lewis and Porter, 2007) as well as lack of appropriate skills (Shevlin and Rose, 2004). Furthermore, systems put in place to support the process, such as a specified activity or an adult perspective, may not only distort outcomes through interpretation but also suppress the child’s voice through lack of flexibility. It is clear that as a result of the complex needs of these children and the diversity of the group (Detheridge, 2000), no research method will fully ameliorate the deficiencies that are inherent. Indeed, it is inevitable that methodology will influence the construction of the realities under consideration and in this respect it is important to accept that it is not actually necessary to seek out or make claims about truth (Ravet, 2007). However, two aspects of the research remain highly significant. The first is that children with communication and learning difficulties not only have the right to have their voices heard but many are competent to do so with autonomy, provided that access tools are flexible and appropriate. Secondly, it is crucial that schools remain at the forefront of

change, striving to overcome the obstacles that prevent these children from being heard. This requires working towards a culture of continual listening, embracing practice that is diverse and varied and acknowledging that listening takes many forms.

## **Implications for Practice**

The research begins from the premise that all children have a right to have their voices heard and to be able to exert an influence over their environment. It also acknowledges that this is a challenging requirement for schools that seek to elicit the views of children with complex needs, if the process is not to be one that is simply superficial or tokenistic. Starting from this premise, the research aims to identify the barriers that prevent children with complex needs from having a voice and to investigate the processes by which schools can ensure that these voices are listened to in order to improve future practice.

The research raises a number of implications for future practice, both within the school itself and for education as a whole. This can be seen in terms of establishing the importance of eliciting the views of children with complex learning difficulties, as well as recognising the benefits this practice holds for children and for society as a whole. Such a transformation of culture is dependent on schools to improve staff training in order to develop disability awareness and celebrate diversity.

Firstly, as reflected by methods used to generate the data for the case studies, schools need to start from the premise that all children, including those with complex needs, have the capacity to express their views, provided they are given appropriate tools to support their differing communication needs. Indeed, the research demonstrates that children with complex needs can express their views about school directly, such as using picture symbols to support their communication. Furthermore, children not only have the capacity to communicate their views but also have the right to do so and should be able to exercise this right according to their level of development. This belief needs to be established and embedded within school policy and practice so that the children's capacity to make choices is recognized by all staff who work in the school (Davis, 2000).

Secondly, schools need to recognize the benefits of listening to all pupils and develop practices that teach children the skills they need in order to make their contribution. The research suggests that by using appropriate methods, children's autonomy can be exercised and independent skills developed (Rose et al, 1999), leading to the development of children's self efficacy, self esteem and personal dignity (Wright, 2008). For example, using a puppet to model explicitly the skills required to make a response, can support some children in

engaging with the task directly. Indeed, providing the subject matter is appropriately rooted in the child's experience and the activity is relevant and accessible, children with complex needs are able not only to express a view about their experiences but can do this independently, without the need for adult intervention or mediation.

By listening to children's voices first hand, issues can be revealed that may otherwise go undetected (Fitzgerald, 2003). Indeed, children's perspectives can provide constructive insights into school experience (Prunty, 2012) and a greater understanding of how children learn (Fraser, 2004). Furthermore, it can help the school to develop a wider understanding of pupil needs (Rose and Shevlin, 2004) and improve its approach to inclusion in general (Messiou, 2002). Within the case studies, for example, the children's own responses to questions about school life were sometimes at odds with the adults who support them. This would suggest that the children may have had different views that could have gone unacknowledged, had they not been consulted directly.

However, the research reflects the need to teach children the skills they require in order to participate effectively. In this respect, schools need to develop children's 'political literacy' so that they are equipped to express their views and able to make choices and decisions (Robinson and Kellett, 2004). This requires schools to incorporate the teaching of higher reasoning skills into its curriculum so that these skills are taught gradually to allow for children's growing development (Rose et al, 1999). Indeed, ongoing work with Colin about the difference between his beliefs and those of others may have helped him to recognise the importance and validity of his own views.

Thirdly, schools need to be at the forefront of disability awareness, modelling practices that the rest of society can learn from. Since society is a diverse community, it is crucial that educational establishments reflect a diversity of views, including the most vulnerable (*Disability Rights Commission, 2002*). Indeed, if schools fail to represent the views of all those who make up their establishments, then they fail to represent the richness of diversity present within society (Bolt, 2004). Furthermore, schools should recognize that discrimination can be subtle and often not intended. This requires schools to be skilled in identifying discriminatory practice and proactive in eliminating the barriers that prevent children from having a voice (Wilson, 2004). For example, it was important that Maggie's class teacher was not wholly influenced by the reporting of an incident from a previous

school trip, leading her to believe that Maggie did not like experiences of this kind. Moreover, schools need to be aware that the very act of labelling children with complex learning difficulties can in itself be discriminatory, creating barriers that prevent others from listening (Veck, 2009).

In order for schools to improve their practice in relation to eliciting the views of children with complex needs, an ongoing programme of support, training and monitoring needs to be established. This requires schools to develop a shared understanding of pupil voice, to identify the obstacles that prevent pupil involvement and develop guidance on how pupil involvement can be increased (Rose, 1999). In this respect, schools need to build a team of staff who have the capacity to reflect on their practice and develop the reflexive skills needed to listen to children effectively (Davis, 2000). Changing the culture within a school by developing the skills of staff and children to engage in meaningful dialogue, takes time (Davis, 2000; Clark, 2006). For this reason, schools should embrace a realistic and achievable model, working steadily within time and budgetary constraints to ensure that agreed approaches are not superficial or tokenistic in character (Rose et al, 1999; Ravet, 2007).

The findings have a number of implications for future practice within the school where the research was carried out but also for other mainstream primary schools and special schools in general. Firstly, schools need to continually seek to find methods that enable children to express their views, since one method alone cannot meet the needs of all children. This requires schools to develop a curriculum that ensures that even children with the most complex needs are given opportunities to make choices and are taught the skills required to engage in meaningful communication. Furthermore, the activity of listening should not be limited to stand alone pupil surveys, but schools need to embrace every opportunity to tune into children as they live out their daily experiences. The process requires flexibility, with adults working to ensure that observations are interpreted correctly, acknowledging that children's preferences will change over time. Moreover, schools need to continue to work with parents, enabling them to express an honest view of their children's experiences of school and to develop meaningful dialogue that seeks to promote the well being of the child.

In addition, there is still much work to be done in terms of helping these children recognize that their opinions are valued and that their views do have an impact on the decisions that are made on their behalf. This is crucial if these children are to develop the skills of self efficacy

and self autonomy that they will require as they approach the increasing challenges of adult life. Schools need to continue to find creative ways to enable all children to be engaged in the design of the research process, so that children remain at the centre of research rather than at the periphery. This requires children to be involved in formulating the questions for investigation, establishing systems for children to receive feedback on outcomes and helping children to recognize the impact of their views on shaping future provision.

For the school in which the research was carried out, a review of policy and practice has been carried out and a number of improvements have been made to the practices by which the views of children are elicited. Firstly, children are taught the skills they need in order to take part in pupil surveys. This includes the embedding of opportunities to seek pupils' opinions across the curriculum, as well as the consistent use of picture symbols across the school to increase their familiarity. Furthermore, pupil surveys are now carried out flexibly, using a range of tools and materials that meet the individual needs of each pupil. For example, more able children have the opportunity to engage in more open ended dialogue about their experiences of school and to raise issues that matter to them. Through school assemblies and school council meetings, children are given clear feedback on the findings of pupil surveys so that they develop a growing sense of what matters to them and how they can make an impact on school life.

Secondly, as well as conducting pupil surveys on a regular basis, as determined by the School Strategic Plan, the school recognises that such surveys are only a small part of the wider body of evidence that contributes towards pupil perspective. These include the informal gathering of evidence provided by observations of a pupil throughout the school day, as well as opinions shared by a pupil at a formal annual review of their statement of special educational needs. Furthermore, the school has developed their use of 'Pen Portraits,' a brief document that summarizes the strengths and interests of the child as well as difficulties and differences, and provides significant information for staff when the child changes class. This document is now written in the first person or child's voice and pupils have greater opportunity to contribute to its content. These are reviewed regularly, respecting the fact that children's preferences change over time.

Furthermore, the research raises the importance for schools in providing a role model for society in terms of developing inclusive practices and ensuring that the diversity of views,



including the most vulnerable, is expressed. In this respect, it is crucial that society as a whole embraces the inclusive values established within schools; so that adults with complex learning difficulties continue to have their voices heard as they make their way in the world. For schools to maintain their presence as a role model for society, they will need to commit to the ongoing professional development of staff, in order to ensure that a culture of listening is developed and inclusive practices are maintained.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the researcher recognises the limitations of the study, both in terms of its size and its inability to ensure that the views of child respondents were wholly authentic. In this respect, it raises a series of questions that serve as a catalyst for further research and longer term study. However, the research did not set out to establish a set of truths, but to identify the issues that prevent children from being listened to and explore some effective inclusive processes for schools to embrace. In this respect, the research has a value in terms of identifying barriers and enabling schools to develop their practice in relation to eliciting the views of children with complex needs. Furthermore, it offers suggestions that may help schools develop a clearer focus on the views of children and young people and their role in decision making.

As expressed earlier, these are aspirations expressed in the recent *Draft Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice: for 0 to 25 years* (2013) which will determine the direction of practice for supporting those with special educational needs within the next few years. It is hoped that this latest document will build on previous practice and provide an effective mechanism for promoting the voice of those who find it most difficult to be heard. Indeed, by fostering the skills of children to express their opinions, schools will help to prepare young people for the adult world, equipped with the capacity to determine the direction of their own lives.

## Appendices

**PUPIL VOICE QUESTIONNAIRE**

**Appendix i**

Name of pupil: Amy

Activities at school	Session 1		Session 2		Session 3	
	like	don't like	like	don't like	like	don't like
school	√		√		√	
work	√		√		√	
teachers	√		√		√	
friends	√		√		√	
after school clubs	√		√		√	
school dinners	√		√		√	
snack food	√		√	crackers	√	apricots
school uniform	√		√		√	
trips on the mini-bus	√		√		√	
assemblies	√		√		√	
playtimes	√		√		√	
multi-sensory room	√		√		√	
scooters	√		√		√	
bikes	√		√		√	
ship	√		√		√	
ICT	√		√		√	
adventure playground	√		√		√	
balls	√		√		√	
musical instruments	√		√		√	
toys	√			√	√	

Completed with pupil

**Session 1 pm**

After I had modelled using the puppet, the fire alarm went off and we had to evacuate the building. When we returned, Amy was happy to return to the activity and I used the puppet to remodel. Amy appeared quite clear about her responses and there were no hesitations. She used some signing to show she understood some of the symbols e.g. she used the sign for orange. However, I was not sure whether she recognised the symbol for the MSR room or After School Club. She did not copy the puppet's responses which suggested that her responses could be authentic.

**Session 2 am**

Amy was distracted by the school bell at first but soon settled to the task. It was clear that the routine was familiar to her. When I modelled responses with the puppet, I was careful not to follow a pattern in order to make sure she didn't think she had to copy. In spite of limited language, she kept pointing to the 'like' and 'don't like' symbols and saying the words, suggesting she was clear about their meaning. She appeared to recognise the symbols and was beginning to verbalise some words e.g. work. It was clear that the Makaton signs were supporting her understanding. She did not copy the responses of the puppet and there were no hesitations. Her clarity in giving two negative responses suggest that her responses were probably authentic.

*Inconsistent responses: doesn't like toys, doesn't like crackers.*

### **Session 3 pm**

Amy showed she understood the pictures by repeating the words and using Makaton signs.

On a number of occasions she said the word *like* emphatically, making her preference explicit. When placing the picture for cracker on *don't like*, she then changed her mind.

*Inconsistent responses: doesn't like apricots.*

## PARENT INTERVIEW

## Appendix iii

Name of pupil: Amy

Activities at school	likes	doesn't like	not sure	Comments
school	√			She loves going to school. She always wants to go. She gets excited and runs in.
work	√			She likes her work overall. She loves Maths but doesn't like Literacy as much. If she had to choose, she wouldn't choose Literacy.
teachers	√			Belinda is her favourite. She runs up to her and puts her arms round her. She talks about her teachers at home.
friends	√			There are only a couple of children she is wary of. She talks about her friends.
after school clubs	√			She loves trampolining and horse riding. She has tried lots of clubs and loved them all...ICT, Music, Dance...
school dinners	√			When she is given a choice she usually chooses school dinners rather than packed lunch. 9 out of 10 she will choose school dinners.
snack food	√			Fruit...she loves healthy stuff. She will choose banana over chocolate.
school uniform	√			She doesn't ever protest. It lets her know it's a school day.
trips on the mini-bus	√			She loves buses and travelling. She knows she is going somewhere fun.
assemblies	√			I've seen her in assembly. She likes the clapping and the celebration.
playtimes	√			
multi-sensory room	√			She loves all the sensory stuff. She often goes asleep in there.
scooters	√			She finds it difficult to coordinate but she will have a go.
bikes	√			She loves the bikes. Amy will push other children off or get on top of them so she can have a go.
ship	√			She talks about the ship quite a bit. The ship features a lot when she is talking about her day.
ICT	√			She loves the touch screen and i pads. She loves them at home too.
adventure playground	√			Amy likes everything.
balls	√			We're teaching her to catch. She finds it quite fun.
musical instruments	√			She has a room full of instruments at home...a xylophone, drum...We hear them at half five in the morning!
toys	√			It depends on her ability to use it. She does like toys.

## TEACHER INTERVIEW

## Appendix iv

Name of pupil: Amy

Activities at school	likes	doesn't like	not sure	Comments
school	√			She likes the social side of school and the structure.
work	√			She is easily distracted from her work and is keen to look at what other children are doing...but she likes praise. She is happy to do her work if she is clear about what she has to do.
teachers	√			She loves adults. She prefers being in adult company to the company of other children.
friends			√ So-so	She asks about other children when they are not in school and likes looking at their work. She doesn't like to hold hands with other children.
after school clubs			√	Trampolining.
school dinners	√			She likes hot food but she has a reflux problem and has gone back to eating packed lunches.
snack food	√			She likes most things. She does have some preferences but she will eat anything.
school uniform	√			She is very particular about how she changes her clothes after PE.
trips on the mini-bus	√			She enjoys them
assemblies	√			She's quite happy.
playtimes	√			She's become more assertive and is less of a victim at playtime...not so delicate.
multi-sensory room	√			
scooters			√	She's very small...I've not seen her on a scooter.
bikes	√			
ship	√			Yes, I've seen her on that.
ICT			√ So-so	
adventure playground	√			
balls			√ So-so	She's not really bothered.
musical instruments	√			
toys			√ So-so	She prefers to wander and fiddle with objects. She is drawn to piles of papers and opening and closing drawers.

# PUPIL VOICE QUESTIONNAIRE

## Appendix v

Name of pupil: Colin

Activities at school	Session 1		Session 2		Session 3	
	like	don't like	like	don't like	like	don't like
school	√		√		√	
work	√		√		√	
teachers	√		√		√	
friends	√		√		√	
after school clubs		√	√			√
school dinners	√		√		√	
snack food	√	breadstick rice cake cracker apple	√	breadstick rice cake cracker apple banana	√	
school uniform	√		√		√	
trips on the mini-bus	√		√		√	
assemblies	√		√		√	
playtimes	√		√		√	
multi-sensory room	√		√			√
scooters	√		√		√	
bikes	√		√		√	
ship	√		√		√	
ICT	√		√		√	
adventure playground	√		√		√	
balls	√		√		√	
musical instruments	√		√		√	
toys	√		√		√	

Completed with pupil



**Session 1 pm**

A TA observed the session. We started with the question about snack foods. I modelled responses with the puppet, modelling like, then not like, then like, then not like. When it was Colin's turn he copied the puppet's responses. I wondered if he was simply copying the alternating pattern, rather than giving a genuine response.

Colin demonstrated that he didn't like apple or cracker. After the session the TA told me that he did like apple and cracker because he chose it at snack time. However, choosing something is not a sign that you like something. Colin may be used to eating things he doesn't like or he may like the other items more than the apple and the cracker.

It was quite clear that Colin understood the meaning of the After School Club symbol and didn't like this activity as it was a different response to his other responses. This negative response suggested that his other responses were genuine.

**Session 2 pm**

Colin was happy to come and work with me although the teacher told me he had experienced a difficult day. He was upset because he had become very attached to another pupil in the class and she was absent from school. This had led to Colin destroying the classroom.

Concerned that during the last session Colin had copied an alternating pattern of 'like/dislike', I used the puppet to model differently, placing an emphasis on not like. Colin appeared to find it amusing that the puppet didn't like certain foods. Each time I presented a picture to him, he placed the picture on 'don't like' and said 'no more', ending up with all the pictures on the 'not like' board. I was unsure as to whether he found this amusing or whether

it was a reflection of his mood that day. I stopped the activity and remodelled, this time placing an emphasis on 'like'. Colin responded by placing all the cards on 'not like' again but then took them all off and placed them on the 'like' board'.

We finished the activity by sorting the snack food pictures. At this point Colin seemed to be clear about his preferences and there was only one difference from the previous session. Colin still disliked breadstick, snackajack, cracker and apple but also added in banana. This would suggest that the TA's suggestion that Colin did like apple and cracker was incorrect as it was a consistent response. It was clear that Colin's mood at the time of the activity affected his responses and ability to engage in the activity.

*Inconsistent responses: liked after school club, doesn't like banana.*

### **Session 3**

Before the session Colin had been upset. He was confused because he had seen his mother at school and didn't understand why. However, by the time I came to work with him, he was settled and happy to engage.

We began by sorting the snack foods. At first Colin was adamant he didn't like breadsticks 'no more'. However, he then changed his mind and put all the snack symbols on the 'like' board. I again wondered if using the puppet confused him. He kept repeating "Tell Tom [the puppet]." I reminded him I wanted to know what Colin thought and put the puppet away.

During the activity, Colin kept trying to turn over the 'don't like' board, saying "I don't want no more." He appeared to show that he didn't want the opportunity to say 'don't like'. I had to keep turning the board back over and saying "You need to choose." Colin was adamant he didn't like the Multi-Sensory Room.

On this occasion he said he didn't like After School Club which was consistent with a previous response.

*Inconsistent responses: liked all snack foods; didn't like the multi-sensory room; didn't like after school clubs.*

**Further information**

Colin is currently unsettled at school and at home and very attached to his mother. The family have recently suffered bereavement and this may have triggered memories for Colin in relation to a previous bereavement.

## PARENT INTERVIEW

## Appendix vii

Name of pupil: Colin

Activities at school	likes	doesn't like	not sure	Comments
school	√			He says he's happy. He talks about his friends and what's happened at school.
work	√			He likes his homework. You can see it in his face. You can see he's enjoying it and concentrating. If he didn't like it he wouldn't do it.
teachers	√			He talks about his teacher.
friends	√			He talks about his friends. He gets upset if his friends are ill or hurt and he keeps talking about it.
after school clubs	√			Trampolining. He keeps repeating the word. He does Rock Challenge every year. He would refuse if he didn't like it.
school dinners			√	He doesn't say a lot but he does eat them.
snack food	√			He eats whatever you give him.
school uniform			√	It's a routine. It helps him understand that it is a school day. He puts it on. But he does get excited about non-school uniform days.
trips on the mini-bus	√			As long as he is well prepared. He always says he's had a good time.
assemblies	√			He loves assemblies. He loves getting the Silver Coin.
playtimes	√			Any outdoor activities but he doesn't like the rain.
multi-sensory room	√			He does enjoy it but he can get over excited.
scooters			√	He does try but his balance isn't brilliant. It depends on his mood.
bikes	√			He loves the bikes at school.
ship	√			
ICT	√			He loves the I Pad. He likes images. He can get obsessed e.g. Shredder from Ninja Turtles.
Adventure playground	√			
balls		√		He doesn't really play with balls. His coordination is a problem. He's out of his comfort zone. He likes to hold it rather than throw it.
Musical instruments	√			He loves the drums. He plays really fast and he's got a good rhythm.
Toys	√			He likes little toys e.g. little figures. He'll empty the box to find a specific thing. He likes cars, caravans and camper vans. He can get obsessed about them.

Further information provided by parent: Colin likes to play games. He likes to give you the wrong answer for a joke e.g. He looks at the word 'at', laughs and says 'as'.

## TEACHER INTERVIEW

## Appendix viii

Name of pupil: Colin

Activities at school	likes	doesn't like	not sure	Comments
school	√			He's enthusiastic and generally comes into school happy.
work	√			He tells us about what he's learning e.g. "We're learning to..."
teachers	√			He has good relationships with adults. He wants to please.
friends	√			He is a bit lost when his friends aren't in school. He wants to have friends. He has latched on to a particular child and is upset if she's not here.
after school clubs	√			Trampolining...Dance Club.
school dinners	√			He loves pizza day. He likes choosing his meal in the morning.
snack food	√			He likes snack time a lot. He gives everything a go. He enjoys the social aspect to snack time.
school uniform			√	
trips on the mini-bus	√			He goes out on the minibus to do trampolining.
assemblies	√			He likes the Spring Chicken song. He enjoys taking part in class assemblies.
playtimes	√			He sometimes wants interaction and sometimes wants to be on his own. He sometimes rides the bike by himself.
multi-sensory room	√			Yes although he can get a bit silly.
scooters		√		I've never seen him on a scooter.
bikes	√			
ship	√			He likes being in the ship area. Sometimes he likes his own space and likes to wander along by the fence.
ICT	√			I pads and computers.
Adventure playground	√			
balls	√			If we're doing it, he'll enjoy it.
Musical instruments	√			He loves the big drums.
Toys	√			He likes the cars and the garage. He likes drawing.

**Further information**

Colin is having a difficult time at the moment. He has spoken at home about his dad passing away. He is very clingy to Mum and she is finding it hard even to pop into a shop. He is very attached to certain children and adults at the moment.

Colin is generally unsure about what he wants at the moment. Reward charts have become an obsession and he constantly wants a sticker. He brings in items from home such as receipts or a letter and then won't let go of it. He wants to take everything home.

He became very negative and we have been encouraging him by rewarding the positives. He now has a Happy Chart and earns a smiley face whenever he does something positive.

# PUPIL VOICE QUESTIONNAIRE

## Appendix ix

Name of pupil: Maggie

Activities at school	Session 1		Session 2		Session 3	
	like	don't like	like	don't like	like	don't like
school	√		√		√	
work	√		√		√	
teachers	√		√		√	
friends	√		√		√	
after school clubs	√		√		√	
school dinners	√		√		√	
snack food	√		√		√	
school uniform	√		√		√	
trips on the mini-bus	√		√		√	
assemblies	√		√		√	
playtimes	√		√		√	
multi-sensory room	√		√		√	
scooters		√	√		√	
bikes	√		√		√	
ship	√		√		√	
ICT	√		√		√	
adventure playground	√		√		√	
balls	√		√		√	
musical instruments	√		√		√	
toys	√		√		√	

Completed with pupil

**Session 1 am**

Maggie was happy to work with in a quiet space outside the classroom without a teaching assistant. She concentrated throughout the task and only became distracted for a moment when a member of staff put a book on the shelf above us.

When I introduced the puppet she wanted to call it Maggie. I allowed her to do this but was concerned that she may become confused between her own choices and the choices of the puppet.

She sometimes replied 'no' but then placed the symbol on the 'yes' board. If I asked the same question again as a way of checking she was happy with her response, she sometimes gave a different response. This suggested the possibility that she may have thought my repetition of the question indicated that her first response was incorrect.

When I questioned Maggie about her uniform she said she liked it. I then probed further by pointing to different parts of her uniform. Maggie responded that she liked her skirt, jumper and tights.

Maggie found some of the symbols difficult to interpret. e.g. she thought the symbol for *friends* meant *playing*. However, when I said the word *friends*, she signed the word using Makaton, showing that she understood.

**Session 2 pm**

Maggie still displayed some hesitation when responding. She sometimes said and signed the word 'yes', placed the picture on the 'don't like' board, then changed her mind and moved it



across to the 'like board'. She seemed to be clear about her preference for 'like' as she signed the word for 'yes'. However, I was still unsure as to whether Maggie felt that 'like' was the correct response, despite the fact the puppet had modelled the possibility of saying 'don't like'.

*Inconsistent responses: likes scooters*

### **Session 3**

Maggie hesitated and changed her mind on two questions. She clearly recognised and understood the symbols and was able to say the word when I showed her the cards. Further questioning demonstrated she had good understanding e.g. she knew her teacher's name. I felt confident that her responses were correct.

In summary, on all three tasks Maggie gave consistent responses, apart from one occasion when she said she didn't like scooters. It is likely that Maggie's responses are an accurate reflection of her preferences. Questioning suggested she appeared to understand the symbols. The occasion when she gave a negative response, suggests she was happy to say 'don't like' but generally chose not to.

**PARENT INTERVIEW**

**Appendix xi**

Name of pupil: Maggie

Activities at school	likes	doesn't like	not sure	Comments
school	√			Enthusiastic about school. Happy to go in. She asks "Is it school?" If I say yes she says "Yeah!"
work	√			She likes some work. Sometimes she says it's boring.
teachers	√			She's never said she has a problem. If Maggie doesn't like something you know about it.
friends	√			She talks and sings about her friends. She sings the names of children in her class.
after school clubs	√			Rock Challenge. She loves dance and computer club. She plays on the I Pads.
school dinners	√			She alternates between packed lunch and school dinners.
snack food			√	
school uniform		√		She doesn't like her skirt and tights. She prefers leggings. When she gets home she strips off her skirt and tights.
trips on the mini-bus	√			She tells me when she's been on the minibus.
assemblies	√			She loves showing off her work and getting a silver coin.
playtimes	√			She's an outdoor child. She loves playing outside and on the bikes.
multi-sensory room		√		She never chooses the MSR Room when we go to Fun Club.
scooters	√			
bikes	√			
ship	√			
ICT	√			
adventure playground	√			
balls			√	
musical instruments	√			
toys	√			

## TEACHER INTERVIEW

## Appendix xii

Name of pupil: Maggie

Activities at school	likes	doesn't like	not sure	Comments
school	√			She's happy to come to school.
work	√			The majority of the time she works well. When she's in a funny mood she doesn't want to do it.
teachers	√			She likes to give me a hug and then she says "Hugs for home."
friends	√			Last year she liked some of the boys. She doesn't particularly have friends in this class. She likes everyone.
after school clubs	√			Dance, ICT and Music.
School dinners	√			She alternates school dinners and packed lunches. She's happy to choose her school dinner.
Snack food	√			She eats everything.
school uniform	√			She does have funny phases with her tights sometimes and doesn't want to put them on.
Trips on the mini-bus			√	She did have some problems at Paultons Park last year.
assemblies	√			Always happy and joins in.
playtimes	√			She always comes in and tells me what she did at playtime. She likes to encourage others to do the same.
multi-sensory room	√			She's happy to go in. We go at least once a week and she joins in.
scooters	√			She plays on them all the time.
bikes	√			She plays on them all the time.
ship	√			
ICT	√			She likes to go on the Assembly songs.
adventure playground	√			
balls			√	She doesn't have a particular preference for balls. She doesn't generally choose them.
musical instruments	√			She plays with them in the music lesson. She doesn't choose them outside the lesson.
toys	√			She likes cars, dinosaurs, Bratz toys, dolls. She'll play with most things.

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