

So I met an EP...?

Dr Imogen Howarth

Specialist Educational Psychologist, Suffolk Psychology and Therapy Services

If you are interested in this area please get in touch with Imogen directly (Email: imogen.howarth@schoolschoice.org)

At the Crossroads

For a recent tribunal case regarding Post-16 provision, an educational psychologist (EP) gathered a young person's views through a series of illustrated and Person-Centred conversations. The young person emphatically and repeatedly expressed her wish to remain in education locally; to be with her friends and in a familiar setting, where she had been offered a place. Her wishes were fully supported by the Local Authority and experienced college staff who knew the young person well and were confident that they could provide the support she would need. The tribunal panel nonetheless gave greater weighting to parental wishes for an out-of-county residential setting, concurring that this would provide more expertise and consistency than was locally offered.

Three weeks into the new term, this young person's anxieties had skyrocketed, resulting in challenging behaviours which proved unmanageable for the specialist placement, and she returned home. It is hoped that the young person's opinions will now be afforded greater value and respectfully acted upon.

This article invites readers to consider how often they have heard variations of this narrative of children's disempowerment. Perhaps there are new ways for EPs to ensure that children's authentic views are gathered, shared, and heard.

September 2014 marked the introduction of the *SEND Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years*. For many, one of its most significant steers is the emphasis now placed upon obtaining and considering the views of children and young people (CYP). This message is reinforced throughout the guidance (Department of Education, 2014), stating that Local Authorities:

- *...must have regard to the views, wishes and feelings of the child or young person...participating as fully as possible in decisions, and being provided with the information and support necessary to enable participation in those decisions (1.1), by:*
 - *providing them with access to the relevant information in accessible formats*
 - *giving them time to prepare for discussions and meetings, and**
 - *dedicating time in discussions and meetings to hear their views (9.24);*
- *...must consult CYP about the content of their EHC plan at inception and review (1.4);*
- *...must, from early years, give the views of CYP due weight according to their age, maturity and capability (1.6), which might include observation for a very young child, or different methods of communication such as the Picture Exchange Communication System (9.45); and*
- *...should consider whether some young people may require advocacy to express their views, and must not use the views of parents as a proxy for young people's views but make arrangements to engage with them directly (1.10).*

This is far from an exhaustive list. The Code also encourages participation and trust between Local Authority staff and CYP and their families. For example, by making use of existing forums, with strong feedback mechanisms that demonstrate impact, by involving CYP in developing their Local Offer and in shaping the commissioning of services.

CYP views are expected to be gathered at each stage of an assess–plan–do–review cycle in educational settings. In any process of transition planning or intervention reviewing, the Code states “The views of the pupil should be included...through involving the pupil in all or part of the discussion itself, or gathering their views as part of the preparation. (6.7).”

So, to what extent do EPs model this? Do we challenge practice that does not yet conform to the expectations of the Code? To explore what ‘expressing their views’ might actually mean, the author developed a model of action research that put at its centre the voice of the child. Specifically, this aimed to articulate the interacting factors that EPs and other professionals could consider when garnering children's views. This article describes the methods and

findings of this research in order to stimulate EPs to think of new and creative ways to foreground children's voices. Could you do something differently?

Listening, Understanding, Participating...

Language matters. To be listened to is not conceptually the same as to hold a view; to have a voice does not convey any particular level of participation; and subtle changes in language can reinforce power differentials between CYP and adults or empower CYP. Listening requires reciprocal expectations: CYP will not voice their opinions into a vacuum. It is the interactive skill of listening which both acknowledges CYP's right to be listened to and validates the importance of their views (Dickins, 2011).

Ensuring that CYP have a voice is also a moral obligation, encapsulated in the phrase often adopted by marginalised groups 'nothing about us without us'. CYP should be involved in and informed about decisions that affect their lives. They need to understand and be able to express their opinions on what is happening and have their views taken into account. CYP also have a right to be provided with any results or data gathered about them in an accessible format, in order that they can understand and comment. Alternative and creative ways to elicit views are very important and merit further discussion but finding the most appropriate conduit is only part of the picture.

What is being asked of the CYP is as fundamental as how it is asked. Some EPs have, for a number of years, been exploring the need to elicit the child's feelings on a *process* (Gersch, 1996, Quicke, 2003) as well as simply describing likes or dislikes. It is quite impossible to separate the CYP's perspectives, anxieties, motivations or a host of other drives from the activity with which they are engaged.

If CYP do not expect to contribute and their efforts are not supported, they may come to understand that their role is not to question or offer views. They could become disempowered and further marginalised (Jelly, Fuller and Byers, 2000).

Existing Barriers

There is an assumption that CYP understand the purpose and relevance of their interaction with educational professionals — and in particular the 'assessment'. CYP's behaviours are influenced by their beliefs about the purpose of the assessment and it is important that they have access to accurate information beforehand (Lubel and Greaves, 2010).

Preparation is all the more important for pupils with additional support needs, to have experience of how, when and why they could give their views. When surveyed as part of the current study, very few EPs confirmed that their services gave out information on assessment, or their role, specifically designed for CYP.

Adults will often speak on CYP's behalf, and the children become habituated to this. They reinforce the cycle by looking to adults for answers and reassurance, even when simple questions are directed to the CYP.

Action Research

The present research had several aims:

- to develop tangible resources that EPs could use in their practice, alongside guidance for school procedures around EP involvement;
- to make use of visual supports on an accessible interface, developed with children through iterative cycles;
- to explore children's views on the process (before, during, afterwards) of meeting with an EP, in order to empower them to express their opinions and know these were valued;
- to use feedback from pupils who had met with an EP, in order to improve service practice and delivery; and
- to find out what could be enabling for children about the *process* of being asked for their views: going beyond merely finding out what they liked or disliked.

This was designed as action research: a spiral of planning, action and evaluation where those involved are participants in the change. Focus groups, observations, interviews and thematic analysis led to the development of a pupil information leaflet and iPad app to support CYP to express their opinions. CYP were invited to use both the leaflet and app. They were asked for their views on the resources themselves, and on the process of being part of the research: what it was like to share their thoughts and contributions.

Questions were designed to explore the CYP's experience of competency, autonomy and relatedness. For example, how did they find the process of assessment? Were they prepared and how? Did they receive feedback, feel supported and able to say what they thought? Did they feel listened to?

The main issues to arise were:

- CYP *misunderstood the questions* they were asked by EPs, or missed the purpose behind the question. This was impacted by their general communicational abilities, particularly receptive language, but also reflected their experience of giving their own views.
- They had a *lack of motivation* to answer questions. This might have been due to the timing of the meeting, task expectations or general disengagement with the materials they were given to use.

- They were *confused by the role* of the EP, mixing them up with other professionals they had seen. This was impacted upon by what had been said to the young person beforehand and improved where visual resources had been used to explain an EP's assessment.
- Following the assessment, CYP were *unable to recall* the meeting or had no understanding of what might happen as a result. Again, this was impacted upon by what had been said at the time and afterwards. If the pupil had been left with a letter or other memory aid, this was helpful.

Preparation and recall

Despite the importance of CYP needing cumulative experiences of how, when and why they could give their views, the research indicated that they lacked opportunities to express views in other school-based contexts.

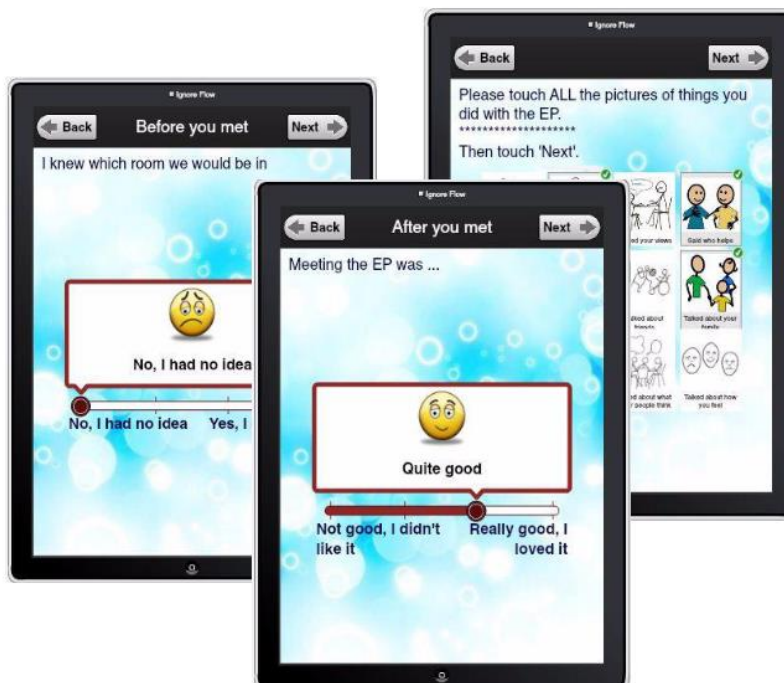
There is a greater role for schools and families to provide CYP with a context of why they are seeing an EP and having an assessment. Part of the necessary preparation would be to divide the questions so that some were asked before the CYP actually met the EP. This would address the issues faced by CYP with temporal difficulties in suppressing current knowledge to comment on a previous state of mind. EPs could be more transparent about their purpose, and CYP could be given an explanatory, accessible and personalised summary of what took place. Those questions relevant to ask after meeting the EP would be best given later the same day or the next, to enable pupils' maximum recall of the event.

Designing the iPad app

The design of the iPad app was reviewed with each cycle of participation. The final version proved very child-friendly, using multimedia to engage and help pupils talk about their assessment and their experience of meeting with the EP. It incorporated multiple choice questions, open questions and drawing as responses. It was interactive and supported with clear text, simple line-drawn images and emoticons to support slider questions.

CYP had multiple choices to recall activities from their meeting with the EP and emotions pictures to help them state how it felt to be asked their views. Some also chose to draw their answers, which helped greatly and highlighted the power of being lost in the flow of the activity.

None of the pupils needed any encouragement to explore the iPad app. The device was highly motivating and gave non-readers or CYP with expressive language difficulties a chance to show independence within an established zone of comfort: competence with an intuitive interface. The text being presented in simple, short sentences accompanied by pictures was of benefit. Irrespective of reading ability, the app also provided an opportunity for individuals to demonstrate levels of exploration, comprehension and literacy.



Relationships and Power

Thematic analysis showed overwhelmingly that whilst the tools to seek CYP's views on practice and process are important, the relationship they had with a supporting adult is even more so. It was very clear that the iPad would not

replace the need to help with explanation, or cueing and recall, or the hundreds of attuned responses that have been observed during this action research.

CYP in dyads, where a collaborative relationship had developed with an adult, were able to express authentic, extended and empowered responses. They had their views explicitly acknowledged and valued. Key attributes of best practice were:

- attempting to reduce the power imbalance and using a language of togetherness ('we' and 'us');
- modelling attentiveness, interest and respect;
- careful scaffolding of multimodal and specific support strategies;
- showing sensitivity towards interpreting the CYP's verbal and non-verbal communications;
- repetition, paraphrasing and the cued use of pictures and gesture;
- emphasising salient information to maximise the pupil's understanding and reduce the information load; and
- following a pace that was child-led and explicitly acknowledged, clarifying and valuing the CYP's views.

This research supports the literature on the usefulness of photographs, pictures and video to provide non-verbal support for pupils expressing views (Day, 2010; Lewis, Newton and Vials, 2008). What appears unique to this research is that the vital role of a much wider interpretation of non-verbal communications and interactions was also documented. The range of non-verbal support recorded encompassed gesture, facial expression, visual props such as the EP's photo or pupil information leaflet, and body positioning. Less immediately obvious strategies included long pauses, where adults would calmly wait in order to allow processing time, a behaviour that was observed to be helpful to many of the pupils.

A powerful way to engage the CYP in the process was for them to draw their responses and to then photograph the drawings to view them within the app. Drawing allowed the CYP to feel competent, and there was clearly no wrong answer. It helped to reduce power imbalances and gave the CYP processing time, where they did not have to sustain their communication skills. In this sense it provided a break from the intensity of the unfamiliar social situation.

It was interesting to note that the CYP's views were invariably met with positive feedback and targeted praise. This modelled high expectations of contributing, having views validated and appropriate responses to others' views. Strong arguments are made in the literature regarding the importance of CYP's views in shaping and critiquing the process, rather than only describing likes or dislikes (Gersch, 2001; Holland, Renold, Ross and Hillman, 2010). This research found that children of six were able to comment upon what they enjoyed or would change, why and how.

Looking Forwards

Ideas for future developments in best practice were drawn from each stage. They included:

- creating podcasts of EPs defining and explaining their role to CYP;
- explaining the assessment to the CYP beforehand using comic-strip style conversations;
- helping a CYP to generate questions before meeting the EP;
- taking photos of the room, people present and resources used; and
- supporting pupils to give their views over more than one session.

This research suggests that to empower CYP they would like:

- photos of the EP who is to see them in advance;
- adults they meet to explain why, what they will be doing and how it will potentially help them; and
- simple, accessible and engaging resources to aid their preparation, understanding and subsequent recall.

Good practice guidance for schools to address some of these difficulties would include:

- ensuring all relevant staff, including TAs, knew about the EP visit and its possible outcomes so that they could answer any queries that the CYP may have;
- senior staff ensuring that the pupil was prepared in advance of the meeting and knew where and when the EP intended to meet with them; and
- preparation for meeting the EP (for example using a podcast or leaflet) extending over a period that gave the CYP sufficient time to process, question and understand.

Where Next?

So, if meeting an EP is to be empowering, to be useful and to give the CYP a voice then preparation is key. There are conduits to help, but they are underused and must be part of a much wider feedback loop, not just of EP services but of the whole educational system. This extends to the listening ethos of the school environment, to the communicative verbal and non-verbal behaviours of those supporting the CYP and to developing an understanding that all these supporting factors are necessary and interconnected.

We need to listen to CYP about how to listen to CYP. Dipping into their lives for a brief moment and then seeking feedback with a comment transcribed or questionnaire is insufficient and will not attain the ideals of CYP views set out in the Code. Furthermore, it should be recognised that unless EPs have clearly articulated what they are doing, to the key adults around the CYP, and to the CYP themselves, how can CYP offer comment on their assessment, their concerns and their hopes and dreams? This article aims to provide some steers to evaluate practice and practical strategies for EPs to consider and adapt that will help children to remember positive interactions and to shape future ones.

References

- Day, S. (2010). Listening to young children: An investigation of children's day care experiences in Children's Centres. *Educational & Child Psychology, 27*(4), 45–55.
- Department for Education, & Department of Health. (2015). *SEND code of practice: 0 to 25 years* (DfE Publication No. DFE-00205-2013). Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25>
- Dickins, M. (2011). *Listening to young disabled children*. London, England: National Children's Bureau.
- Gersch, I. S. (1996). Listening to children in educational contexts. In R. Davie, G. Upton & V. Varma (Eds.), *The voice of the child: A handbook for professionals*. London, England: Falmer Press.
- Gersch, I. S. (2001). Listening to children. In J. Wearmouth (Ed.), *Special educational provision in the context of inclusion: Policy and practice in schools*. London, England: David Fulton Publishers.
- Holland, S., Renold, E., Ross, N. J., & Hillman, A. (2010). Power, agency and participatory agendas: A critical exploration of young people's engagement in participative qualitative research. *Childhood, 17*(3), 360–375.
- Jelly, M., Fuller, A., & Byers, R. (2000). *Involving Pupils in Practice: Promoting partnerships with pupils with special education needs*. London, England: David Fulton Publishers.
- Lewis, A., Newton, H., & Vials, S. (2008). Realising child voice: The development of Cue Cards. *Support for Learning, 23*(1), 26–31.
- Lubel, R., & Greaves, K. (2010). The development of an EPS information booklet for primary age pupils. *Educational Psychology in Practice, 16*(2), 243–248.
- Quicke, J. (2003). Educating the pupil voice. *Support for Learning, 18*(2), 51–57.