

Consulting with children and young people who have disabilities: views of accessibility to education

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The Education (Disability Strategies and Pupils' Educational Records) (Scotland) Act 2002 requires local authorities to prepare and implement an accessibility strategy to improve access to education for young people with disabilities. In this article, Dr Richard Woolfson, Principal Psychologist, Michael Harker, Depute Principal Psychologist, Dorothy Lowe, Senior Psychologist, Mary Shields, Senior Psychologist, and Hilary Mackintosh, Research Assistant, all from Renfrewshire Educational Psychology Service, report the response of one local authority. Staff from the psychological service carried out a two-stage research study with children and young people. Stage One involved a postal questionnaire for 290 pupils with a range of disabilities; parents and carers were asked to assist their children with the questionnaire. Stage Two involved young people with disabilities in a number of focus groups. The results recorded here confirm that the area of greatest pupil satisfaction is physical access to the school environment. Few problems are identified regarding access to information from school and most pupils with disability consider that their opinions are listened to and respected. Other findings suggest that pupils with disability generally view their teachers as supportive, while pupils often struggle to complete homework. Further, the pupils indicated that they would like to be more closely consulted about access to the curriculum, working independently and the provision of support. Older students suggested that preparation for post-school options should start much earlier. In the light of these findings, the authors discuss recommendations for future practice and for further research.

Key words: pupils, disabilities, access to education, surveys.

Introduction

Since 2002, responsible bodies in Scotland (that is, local authorities and proprietors of independent, grant-aided and self-governing schools) have been required by the Education (Disability Strategies and Pupils' Educational Records) (Scotland) Act (Scottish Parliament, 2002) to prepare and implement accessibility strategies to improve, over time, access to education for young people with disabilities. This Act specifically requires responsible bodies to prepare an accessibility strategy which has the three main purposes of:

- increasing the extent to which pupils with a disability can participate in the school's curriculum;
- improving the physical environment of the school in order to increase the extent to which pupils with a disability can take advantage of education;
- improving communication with pupils with a disability, taking into account their disabilities and any preference expressed by them or their parents.

Reports by HMIe (2002) and its equivalent body in England and Wales (OFSTED, 2002) recognise the challenges that teachers and schools face in developing inclusive practice and find that the inclusiveness of a school is influenced by its values, climate and ethos. Despite identifying good practice, research has shown that inequalities in access to schooling persist. Shevlin, Kenny and McNeela (2002) found that access to the curriculum for pupils with disabilities was inconsistent and was often dependent on the attitude of the school or individual teachers. Further, Agran, Alper and Wehmeyer (2002) found that teachers feel it is not appropriate to have the same expectations of disabled students in terms of accessing the curriculum.

It has been established that basic access and mobility issues can impact on social relationships (Shevlin et al., 2002) and academic achievements (Wilson, 2004). Further, the inability to participate in some aspects of the curriculum widens the gap between young people with disabilities and their non-disabled peers leaving children with disabilities feeling isolated (Atkinson & Williams 1990, cited in Shevlin et al., 2002; Wilson, 2004). This underlies the importance of addressing accessibility issues.

The Scottish Education Act of 2002 also points out that, in preparing their accessibility strategy, a responsible body shall 'consult such children, parents and young persons as they think fit'. Indeed, numerous organisations stress the importance of professionals consulting with children about matters that have an impact on their lives. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations in 1989 and approved by the UK Government in 1991, states that:

'parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child.'
(UN, 1989, article 12)

In Scotland this principle is given further weighting by the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, which states that each child who can form his or her views on matters affecting him or her has the right to express those views if he or she wishes and be 'actively involved in assessments, decision-making meetings, case reviews and conferences' (Scottish Executive, 1995). Similar ideas are reflected in policies for England and Wales (see, for example, DfES, 2001; DoH, 2001; Connexions, 2005). Therefore, consulting with children is not simply the preferred model but is, rather, a legal requirement placed upon professionals working with children and young people across the UK.

Unique challenges arise when consulting children with disabilities, in particular those with severe communication difficulties. When consulting with children and young people with communication difficulties it is important to recognise barriers that may prohibit meaningful involvement. Issues such as the need to use communication aids, the child's routine and time demands should be carefully considered.

To overcome such barriers, researchers have identified suitable communication tools which may be used, including various interview techniques, focus groups, questionnaires, mind maps, games, puppets, art activities, Circle Time and many more (Save the Children, 2001; Clark, MacQuail & Moss, 2003; Fajerman, Treseder & Conner, 2004). The use of an advocate for a young person with communication difficulties can also be a useful strategy, though itself introducing further challenges – an advocate's trustworthiness and issues of authenticity should be considered (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson & Spiers, 2002; Tobin & Begley, 2004). It is important to consider these alternative methodologies where necessary to ensure that all children and young people can participate effectively and meaningfully in consultation.

This current paper outlines one local authority's consultation exercise involving children and young people who have additional support needs, with the aim of seeking their views on how to improve access to the curriculum, access to the physical environment of the school and access to information from the school. The consultation exercise was conducted by a research team from the Educational Psychology Service. In Stage One, pupils' views were sought through the use of a postal questionnaire. In Stage Two, pupils' views were sought through focus groups.

Classifying disability is problematic and can be affected by many factors such as the child's self-perceptions, parental perceptions and the attitudes of the wider population. For the purpose of this study, however, an objective administrative criteria was used as a pragmatic way of determining who was eligible for participation – any pupil with a Record of Needs (Scotland's equivalent to a Statement of Special Educational Needs) was considered to have a disability.

The methodology and procedures for the study were subject to approval and supervision by the local authority's Educational Psychology Service Research Ethics Board, which requires all research projects to meet the ethical standards

set by, firstly, the British Psychological Society (2000) and secondly the Joint Committee on Standards (1994). This ensured that key issues such as confidentiality, anonymity, participants' rights and informed consent were handled appropriately.

Stage One – postal questionnaires

Background

There are many valid and reliable ways to consult with children and young people about issues that affect their lives, for instance, focus groups and individual interviews. Yet these methods can be expensive, time-consuming and usually only involve a small sample of the total population of children and young people.

An alternative method for gathering children's views – postal questionnaires – has a number of advantages over other data-collecting strategies, including economy of time and money and collection of information from a lot of people very quickly (Gillham, 2000). However, there are several problems associated with the use of questionnaires, including concerns about completeness and accuracy and the impossibility of ensuring the honesty of the answers. In addition, researchers can both over-estimate and under-estimate child competence, which could lead to inaccurate conclusions about the child's responses to a questionnaire (Lewis & Lindsay, 2002). In this study, questionnaires were used in order to sample a large population. It was also felt that, although the children may experience some difficulties, the age group of the children who were invited to participate made this method acceptable.

Method

To span both primary and secondary schooling and to ensure that the consultation exercise involved pupils with disabilities, the questionnaire was sent to pupils who lived in the local authority and who, at the time of posting:

1. were between the ages of ten and 13 years;
2. had a Record of Needs;
3. attended mainstream school or special school in the local authority.

Names of pupils who met these three basic criteria were generated from the Educational Psychology Service's own administrative database. The pupils had a wide range of disabilities including physical disability, sensory disability (visual and hearing), learning disability (general and specific) and communication disability.

Pupils who attended special schools for pupils with very severe learning or communication difficulties were excluded from this sample, first, because the task of completing the questionnaire appropriately could be too demanding and, second, because they would be invited to take part in a separate focus group for pupils with severe difficulties (in Stage Two of this consultation exercise). This resulted in a total of 290 pupils who were invited to take part in the postal survey. Completed questionnaires were returned by 98 pupils (34%) and a summary of children's ages is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Age of participants

Age in years	Frequency
9	4
10	17
11	17
12	30
13	26
14	4

Questionnaire structure

Questionnaires were sent to each pupil's parent or carer with a covering letter that included the following paragraph:

'We would like you to spend some time with your child discussing this questionnaire. We realise that your child may be unable to complete the questionnaire unaided and therefore, perhaps you could act as their reader and/or scribe.'

In this way, parents were encouraged to support their child with the task of completing the questionnaire. The questionnaires consisted of 18 statements addressing the three aspects of access to education – curricular, physical and information. Participants were asked to indicate their agreement to each statement with a 'yes', 'no' or 'not relevant' response.

Stage One results

Children and young people were asked to indicate the nature of their difficulty on the questionnaire, with the intention of categorising pupils' difficulties and examining the data for group differences. However, this process was problematic. A number of participants did not respond, some took offence at being asked to describe their difficulties and a number of children had co-morbid disorders making the categorisation process both complex and inaccurate. Therefore, results are presented as a homogeneous group. A total of 98 (34%) fully completed questionnaires were analysed and the results are given in Tables 2, 3 and 4.

Discussion of Stage One results

Analysis of the results given in Tables 2, 3 and 4 confirms that the area of greatest pupil satisfaction is physical access to schools. Most pupils confirmed their ability to move around all parts of the school building and grounds. In addition, most respondents agreed that they were able to attend every class and school activity (for example, after-school clubs) as a result of building accessibility or the provision of transport. Physical access in practical subjects in schools was rated lower, with just over half of respondents indicating that support was provided to enable access to practical subjects when it was required.

The responses to the questionnaire reveal a mixed picture in relation to curricular access for these children and young people. Just over 50% of respondents agreed that their schoolwork was adapted for their specific needs when required. However, just under half of the respondents indicated that they received individual class work especially

Table 2: Age of participants

Question	Yes	No	Not relevant	No answer
1. My school work is adapted for my specific needs.	54	32	11	1
2. I get extra help with my schoolwork from my teacher.	82	9	2	5
3. There are times when I can talk to teachers about my progress.	51	42	3	2
4. I get extra help from a visiting teacher.	38	49	6	5
5. Special arrangements are available when I sit tests or exams.	52	25	19	2
6. A computer is available to me when I need it for school work.	67	26	4	1
7. Special equipment that I need is available when I need it.	45	20	29	4
8. I have individual class work especially to suit my specific needs.	41	46	8	3
9. (Primary school pupils only) I take part regularly in Circle Time.	33	6	56	3

Table 3: Frequency of responses to questions about accessibility to the physical environment of the school (N = 98)

Question	Yes	No	Not relevant	No answer
10. I can move around areas of the school building easily.	83	5	10	0
11. I can move around all areas of the school grounds easily.	82	6	10	0
12. I can attend every class and school activity I want.	76	8	13	1
13. I get support in practical subjects in school when I need it.	53	14	29	2

suited to their particular needs. This indicates that a large proportion of children within this study do not feel they have adequate access to the shared curriculum suggesting that the curriculum needs to be modified further for these children and young people.

A high proportion of respondents agreed that they received extra help with school work from the class teacher or classroom assistant. Only 39% of respondents indicated that they received direct support from a visiting teacher. In terms of ongoing support in class, roughly half of the respondents agreed that there were times during the day when they could talk to a teacher about their progress in school. In primary

Table 4: Frequency of responses to questions about accessibility to school information (N = 98)

Question	Yes	No	Not relevant	No answer
14. My teacher asks me how to make my life easier at school.	35	50	10	3
15. I am invited to attend my review meetings.	40	41	15	2
16. When I attend reviews, I am encouraged to express my views.	37	23	31	7
17. I have been offered the chance to join my school council.	28	58	11	1
18. Letters from school are presented in a way I understand.	57	23	17	1
19. (Secondary school pupils only) I meet regularly with my guidance teacher.	19	32	45	2

school, a high proportion of the sample regularly participated in Circle Time. However, while 68% indicated that a computer was available for school work when required, 20% stated that they do not have access to special equipment when they need it. Although the results indicate that many respondents feel that the support they receive is adequate, it is important to ensure all pupils have access to appropriate resources which may aid their educational progress.

Responses to questions examining attempts made by the school to communicate information to the pupils were less positive. The results indicate that 57 pupils feel that letters from school are presented in a way they can understand. However, less than half of the pupils are asked by their teacher for their views on how to make life easier at school. In secondary schools, a majority of pupils stated that they do not meet regularly with their guidance teacher. With regard to participation and collaboration, half the responses provided indicate they are invited to attend their own review meetings and of these 23% of pupils claim that they have not been encouraged to express their views at the meeting. These results support the findings of other research studies, such as Shevlin et al. (2002) and Agran et al. (2002). It is clear that many children and young people with disabilities are still not gaining adequate access to the full experience of schooling or to communication and consultation processes.

Stage Two – focus groups

Introduction

Robson (2000) defines a focus group as ‘a type of semi-structured interview carried out in a group setting’. Focus groups have been used to investigate the views of children and young people across a broad range of issues. For example, James (1996) used focus groups when researching children’s views on school nutrition programmes, while Woolfson and Harker (2004) used focus groups to explore children’s experiences of racism.

There are several advantages to using focus groups in consultation with children and young people. They are good for

giving confidence to members of the group and they allow the children to set part of the agenda, which can help them to feel more in control of the situation. By asking open-ended questions, the group members are able to structure the nature and extent of their responses, which again helps them gain a sense of control and hopefully allows them to be more honest in their discussions.

However, there are some disadvantages too. For instance, over-estimation and under-estimation of child competence can lead to inaccurate conclusions being drawn from the children’s comments. Children and young people might repeat a previously used response – or even guess the answer – in order to please the researcher, rather than sit in silence. As with all group activities, some voices may be heard more than others during discussions.

There are unique challenges associated with conducting focus groups with children with disabilities. Extra care has to be taken to avoid the use of leading questions during discussion to ensure children do not feel pressured to give the ‘correct’ response. The facilitator is required to display sensitivity to the participants, without causing them to feel patronised or stereotyped. This was achieved by carefully considering the wording of all questions; by using focus group facilitators who were experienced at conducting consultation exercises with children; by asking different groups about separate aspects of accessibility (to maintain their attention throughout the discussion); and by allowing children with severe learning difficulties and/or severe communication difficulties to be accompanied by a carer (typically a special needs auxiliary) whose role was not to participate but to reassure the children and clarify the children’s responses when ideas were not clearly expressed.

Stage Two focus groups

In order to span both primary and secondary schooling, and to ensure that the consultation involved pupils with disabilities, this stage of the consultation exercise involved four focus groups for school-aged pupils and one focus group for post-16 students. Invitations to participate were sent to pupils who lived in the local authority and who, at the time of selection:

1. were between the ages of ten and 13 years (with the exception of Group 5);
2. had a Record of Needs;
3. attended mainstream school or special school in the local authority.

The five focus groups were structured as follows:

- Group 1 – Curricular Access. Five children and young people in this focus group discussed issues to do with curricular access.
- Group 2 – Information Access. Seven children and young people in this focus group discussed issues to do with information access.
- Group 3 – Physical Access. Five children and young people in this focus group discussed issues to do with physical access.

- Group 4 – Supported Group. Five children and young people (all of whom have severe learning difficulties or severe communication difficulties) in this focus group discussed issues to do with all three aspects of access to education.
- Group 5 – Post-16. Eight young people with additional needs who had left school discussed issues to do with all three aspects of access to education. They discussed their own experiences from primary school to leaving school.

Following their participation in a focus group, each young person was sent a summary of their focus group's results, in accordance with guidelines set by other research studies which highlight the importance of involving young people in all stages of a study (for example, the Carnegie Young People Initiative, 2001). This also provided evidence to children and young people that their views were valued and demonstrated that taking part in consultation was worthwhile and meaningful.

Focus Groups 1, 2 and 3

The same list of pupils generated for Stage One of the consultation process was used for Stage Two. To ensure appropriate representation of the range of disabilities, membership of the focus groups was 'weighted' accordingly. For Groups 1 and 2, invitations to participate were sent to three children with moderate learning difficulties, two children with specific learning difficulties, one child with a communication or language difficulty, one child with a visual difficulty, one child with a hearing difficulty and one child with a physical difficulty. In total, eight pupils were invited to participate in each group. Since Group 3 was concerned with physical access, invitations to participate were sent only to those pupils for whom physical access could be a central concern, due to physical difficulties or to difficulties with vision; therefore only six pupils were invited to participate in this group.

Once the lists had been compiled, the educational psychologist involved with each child was asked to confirm that the child would be able to cope in a focus group situation. When suitability was confirmed, the parent or guardian of each child received a letter asking for permission for the researchers to approach their child. Once approval was gained, the young person's headteacher then spoke to each potential primary school participant, while the principal learning support teacher was asked to speak to each potential secondary school participant. The relevant member of staff in each school was sent an information pack (containing information about the focus group) to facilitate this process. Once each pupil had given consent, a confirmation letter was sent out to the young person's parent or guardian and to the young person's school confirming their participation and details of the practical arrangements.

Focus Group 4

Another focus group was set up to allow consultation about accessibility with young people who have severe learning difficulties or severe communication difficulties. Two of the

local authority's special schools were invited and agreed to take part. The educational psychologist for each of these schools suggested the names of six senior pupils they felt would be able to cope in a supportive focus group. Consent was obtained in the same way as for Groups 1, 2 and 3.

Children participating in this focus group were accompanied by a familiar carer from their school who was able to encourage and facilitate participation in the discussion. The pace of the focus group was deliberately slower and there were fewer topics for discussion in comparison to the other focus groups.

Focus Group 5

A post-16 focus group was established to consult with young people who had additional support needs and who had now left school. This group consisted of eight students who attended a course at a local further education college to help them to develop the skills needed to cope with personal and working life. The young people in this group were between 16 and 17 years old. A member of the research team sent an information pack (containing information about the focus group) to the course director who approached the young people to gain consent.

Stage Two – results

Transcripts of the focus groups were analysed in order to identify 'core categories' (as explained by Robson, 1993) present in the responses. These were cross-checked and verified by a second researcher. The main core categories from each group are described as follows:

Curricular Access focus group (N = 5):

1. The majority of school staff are generally caring and supportive when helping pupils with additional support needs to access the curriculum:
'They (teachers) come over to me and help me.'
2. Pupils want to be involved in discussions and negotiations about the type, intensity and timing of curricular support; they often feel excluded from these decisions:
'If I talk to a teacher (about school work), I don't think they listen properly.'
3. Teachers are reluctant to allow pupils to learn independently once support is arranged; pupil's requests to cope independently are often ignored:
'I can get too much help sometimes, and I want to do it (class work) on my own.'
4. The experiences of accessing the curriculum vary greatly within a school, from subject to subject and from teacher to teacher:
'Some of the teachers write on the board, some don't.'
5. Pupils are often confused by the wide range of different, specialist and generic learning support

staff, who may not communicate effectively with each other:

'It gets really confusing (with all the different staff).'

Information Access focus group (N = 7):

1. Information from school, about school matters, is generally understandable and effectively communicated to the pupils:
'Yes I read them (school letters).'
2. Pupils are typically included in review meetings; some, however, are concerned at speaking out at such a meeting:
'Our teachers . . . think you're being cheeky when you give your opinion.'
4. Pupils recognise that involvement in decision making about their schooling has both strengths and weaknesses for them:
'Picking your [subject] choices could result in you picking the wrong choice'.
5. Pupils with a disability have been involved in school councils, but they do not want positive discrimination:
'Maybe the person doesn't want to do it'.
6. Pupils with additional support needs would welcome the introduction of homework clubs, at lunchtime and after school:
'I go to the homework club if the work is too difficult.'

Physical Access focus group (N = 5):

1. Physical access to school buildings and grounds is generally good, but there are specific areas of weakness (for example, stage access, uneven playgrounds or water spillage):
'The playground is uneven and my wheelchair tips easily on it.'
2. Pupils have difficulty in crowd situations and feel that more consideration is needed to help them negotiate school corridors during breaks:
'The corridors are too packed [and] there's people behind you trying to push.'
3. Help is available in class when needed, from the teacher, classroom assistant or learning support staff; equipment and information and communication technologies are readily available when pupils need them:
'Someone from learning support is there to help in class.'
4. Pupils want to have choices about the help offered and to be involved in decisions; teachers often

make assumptions about what the pupil needs without checking:

'My teacher tells me to sit at the front, but usually I can see fine from where I am.'

5. School trips are open to pupils who have difficulties with physical access; pupils are given a great deal of support on these outings by their peers:
'I'm going on an activity holiday with the school.'

Supported focus group (N = 5):

1. Pupils are able to access all areas of the school building and are able to participate fully in school trips; some of these pupils are in their school's council:
'[We] go into town [to visit cafes].'
2. The curriculum is modified for pupils' individual needs; help is available during tests if required; requests for support from teachers are met positively:
'The teachers say it slower so that you can understand.'
3. Pupils frequently rely on family members to help them complete homework because this is very challenging for them:
'When I can't get it right my Mum helps me.'
4. Pupils have full access to school information through teacher explanations, school notice boards, letters, the home-school diary or telephone calls:
'Headteacher comes into class and tells us.'
5. Pupils are usually invited to attend review meetings about themselves, and to speak at them (but they usually do not want to):
'Teachers asked what I thought and how I was getting on.'

Post-16 focus group (N = 8):

1. While at school, pupils typically received adequate support and encouragement from staff regarding their additional needs:
'Learning support teacher took me out of class to explain things more clearly.'
2. Pupils want help right from the start of secondary schooling, not just for exams; teachers should be available and willing to help whenever required:
'Teachers should not ignore you when you have a problem.'
3. Pupils would like to be made aware of potential post-school options early on in their secondary schooling, to allow them enough time for full consideration:
'Teachers should tell you earlier on what you can do when you leave school.'

Table 5: Summary of comments on each aspect of accessibility

Curricular access	Information access	Physical access
Access to the curriculum varies greatly.	Information from school is communicated effectively most of the time.	Physical access is generally good, with some identifiable weaknesses.
Help is often available during tests if required.	Notice boards, letters, phone calls and diaries are used to give information.	Help in class is often available when required.
Pupils would like help to be available from the start of high school.	Pupils are involved in review meetings but some have concerns about this.	Teachers sometimes make assumptions about pupils' needs.
Pupils want to be included in planning their curricular support.	Being able to make their own decisions has strengths and weaknesses.	Some pupils find school crowds difficult, especially at breaks.
School staff are generally caring and supportive.	Pupils should know post-school options early on in secondary school.	School trips are open to children with physical disabilities.
The learning support teacher is a key person in secondary school.	Pupils do not want positive discrimination for pupil council membership.	
Pupils confused by staff who don't communicate well with each other.		
Pupil requests to work independently are often ignored by teachers.		
Pupils rely on family members to complete homework.		
Pupils would welcome homework clubs.		

- Gaining physical access to the building, to the curriculum and to out-of-school activities is not perceived as a problem:
'When I asked for help, I got it.'
- The learning support teacher in secondary schooling is perceived as the key individual who provides support for personal and subject matters:
'These people are dead nice to you, they really do help.'

A summary of the main points about each aspect of access to education is provided in Table 5.

Analysis of the main points that emerged from each focus group revealed a series of over-arching themes that permeated throughout all the group discussions. These are described in Table 6.

Table 6: Over-arching themes from pupil focus groups

Theme	Explanation
Support	School staff (especially learning support teachers) are perceived as supportive when it comes to accessing the curriculum.
Communication	Poor communication between specialist and school staff can cause confusion for the pupils.
Help	While pupils are pleased to have help when needed, they feel that their requests to learn independently are often ignored.
Meetings	Although usually invited to attend review meetings, pupils want to be involved in all decisions about their education.
Information	School information is generally well communicated – difficulties with this are often resolved by teachers or parents.
Homework	Pupils would welcome the opportunity to take part in homework clubs, either at lunchtime or after school.
Building	Physical access is generally good, but there are some weaknesses (for example, stage access, uneven playgrounds).
Movement	Pupils with physical disability often have problems dealing with large crowd situations, at break times and lunch periods.
Inconsistency	The level of help and support available varies greatly from subject to subject and school to school.
Planning	Pupils often feel that full planning regarding their needs is not made until the later stages of secondary schooling.

Discussion of Stage Two results

Analysis of the results from Stage Two suggests that the majority of school staff members are supportive and caring when it comes to children with disabilities accessing the curriculum. Many teachers consistently provide extra assistance and often go to great lengths to help children with additional support needs. However sometimes pupils have difficulty accessing special equipment. In secondary school, pupils typically prefer to use the learning-support base rather than working in the classroom with a classroom assistant. At times, teachers overlook a pupil's additional support needs, which can lead to problems for the child (for instance, a partially-hearing pupil might not be able to hear clearly what is said).

Another dominant theme which emerged is that teachers often fail to seek the pupil's own view of support – they often simply assume that the help provided is both adequate and appropriate without consulting with the pupil. The desire to work independently was expressed clearly by the pupils, as was their desire to negotiate with teachers about the amount and type of help they receive. In some instances, pupils feel that teachers do not always believe they struggle to cope with the workload. Pupils also recognise that having choice in their educational life carries responsibility and some would prefer teachers to make curricular decisions for them.

In comparison, the majority of the pupils report that they are included in review meetings and are given the opportunity

to express their opinions during these meetings. Pupils also feel that their opinions are respected and that their input is important. Sometimes, however, the young people do not know everyone present at the meeting and can worry that their teachers may feel that they are disrespectful if they voice their opinions or ask to work independently.

There seem to be few, if any, problems regarding accessing and understanding information from the school. This information (for example, school handbooks, letters home to parents about school trips) can be easily read by the pupils and, if they have difficulties understanding the information, teachers and/or parents are generally willing to help.

Several issues were raised regarding homework. In particular, many of the pupils with additional support needs often find it too difficult to complete. Although a teacher or classroom assistant is often available to discuss homework assignments with the child, this provision is not always accessible. Often school friends or parents help the child with additional support needs complete their homework. Homework clubs – where they exist – are popular with pupils who have additional support needs. It was strongly suggested that homework clubs should be provided, during lunchtimes and after school to ensure choice, depending on a pupil's extracurricular commitments.

The post-16 focus group also revealed that young people with additional support needs would like to receive help, guidance and support at the start of secondary school, not only in third or fourth year when exams approach. They also stated that more information is needed about the post-school options available to them when they leave school and that this information should be given in the early stages of secondary schooling.

Physical access to schools appears to be the area of greatest pupil satisfaction. There are few problems accessing the actual school building and surrounding areas, though there are some particular concerns (for example, about uneven playgrounds and poor accessibility to the stage). A major problem that children with physical disabilities face is the negotiation of large crowds; they often feel that teachers do not take into consideration the fact that it takes them longer to move around the school compared with able-bodied children. Some schools do not have adequate signs to help direct the children to the different parts of the school building.

Children with physical disabilities are often segregated from the rest of the class during physical education and only sometimes are they able to participate in the same activities as their classmates. Some equipment is difficult to use (for example, badminton shuttlecocks or hurdles), but the pupils at times prefer to conceal the difficulties. Pupils are usually helped in classes that require them to use special equipment (for example, home economics) by classroom assistants or the teacher. Most children are given the choice of whether they would like help or not in these classes (in contrast to the choices regarding help provided in other areas of the curriculum). Pupils with physical

difficulties typically do not like being singled out from the rest of the class, and many would prefer to ask for help rather than being given it without their consent being sought first. Teachers may provide support with the best of intentions, but occasionally the help they give is perceived by the pupil as making the situation worse.

The supported focus group – with pupils with severe learning difficulties and/or severe communication difficulties – confirmed the findings from other focus group discussions. Although special precautions were taken (for example, inviting carers for support, raising fewer topics for discussion and taking the discussion at a slower pace) conducting this group presented challenges. The pupils were not fully engaged with the task at all times and therefore limited information was elicited. In the future, alternative means of consulting children with severe difficulties could be considered (see *Save the Children*, 2001; *Clark et al.*, 2003; *Fajerman et al.*, 2004).

General discussion

This two-stage consultation exercise gathered the views of a range of children with disabilities as part of one local authority's response to the Education (Disability Strategies and Pupils' Educational Records) (Scotland) Act (Scottish Parliament, 2002). Using questionnaires and focus groups to ascertain the views of children and young people with disabilities has allowed triangulation of the data at a whole-group level. The high level of similarity in reports gained through the questionnaires and focus groups confirms the validity of the data collected. This suggests that both methods of data collection can be used effectively to gain the views of most children and young people with disabilities. As discussed earlier in this paper, some important methodological improvements were identified in the process of this consultation exercise.

There may be some uncertainty about whether some answers reflect parents' opinion or pupils' opinions because parents were asked to complete the written part of the questionnaire on behalf of their children where necessary. This could present a threat to the authenticity of the findings, but the responses were scrutinised closely by the researchers for style and content to check that they appeared to be generated by a child.

Another acknowledged difficulty with the questionnaire data is the inability to identify group differences. Although categorisation of the children's difficulties was intended, the previously mentioned problems of non-response and comorbidity would have made the resulting categories meaningless. Despite these methodological concerns, it was felt that, while the postal questionnaire was not a sufficient data collection method by itself, the data yielded did provide a good starting point for developing focus group questions.

The focus group methodology presented challenges too. While potential difficulties in conducting a focus group with young people with severe communication difficulties were anticipated and intended to be minimised, the 'supported

group' condition remained demanding for the participants. Some pupils were not engaged in the discussion, even with supportive carers present.

In addition, although the focus groups were proportionally representative by weighting participants in terms of type of disability, the small sample size may have inhibited some individuals from speaking. That is, with only one child with a hearing impairment taking part in each group, for example, that pupil may not mention a difficulty they experience because they consider it 'their problem' and not applicable to the rest of the group. Furthermore, by having single-topic focus groups the pupils' views on other aspects of access to education were not gathered.

There are specific ethical considerations in a study of this nature. First, researchers have a responsibility to prevent children with disabilities from feeling stereotyped or isolated and therefore mixed focus groups were used. Second, gaining informed consent can be challenging with children who have severe learning difficulties – this was tackled as far as possible by enlisting the help of school staff familiar with each child. Third, researchers should be aware that it may not be possible to gain access to all children who wish to participate in research of this nature as parents often act as 'gatekeepers', preventing children from participating. Fourth, confidentiality can be jeopardised when conducting research; for instance, if a local authority contains only a few children who use a wheelchair, any comments about wheelchair access can be attributed to this group. This concern could be minimised by implementing a rigorous anonymity process and by ensuring that education professionals understand the importance of confidentiality in research. Lastly, 'consultation burn-out' can arise when a relatively small group of children with disabilities are repeatedly involved in consultation studies. This can be eased by giving feedback to the child participants, in order to demonstrate how valuable their comments are, and by stressing the voluntary nature of their involvement.

Ensuring children and young people with disabilities have adequate access to all areas of their education is extremely

important. Many positive steps have been taken towards ensuring that pupils with disabilities have appropriate access to education and most pupils in this study are highly satisfied with many areas, such as physical access and support. However, this study suggests that further training for teachers and revision of school policies may need to be undertaken in order to ensure that all children with disabilities gain full access to an appropriate curriculum at all times.

Following analysis of findings, a wide scale dissemination process began across the local authority, involving education professionals, health professionals and young people. Recommendations were made regarding strategies for improving accessibility to education for pupils with disabilities. These included repeating the consultation exercise every three years as a means of monitoring change and progress; providing more detailed advice to teachers on strategies for seeking the views of pupils who have additional support needs about the type of within-school support that might be appropriate for them; ensuring adequate transfer of information about pupils who have additional support needs to all teachers involved with these pupils; preparing pupils who have additional support needs for participation in school review meetings about their development and progress; providing homework clubs for pupils who have additional support needs; beginning discussions about post-school options with pupils who have additional support needs at the start of their secondary schooling; and giving greater consideration to physical accessibility to specific areas of school buildings and their associated grounds.

Conclusion

This study describes consultation with children and young people who have disabilities about access to education. The results confirmed that consultation in this context can be meaningful and effective when appropriate methods are used. Young people have sincere opinions about access to education and consulting them can provide local authorities with greater insight into possible areas of improvement.

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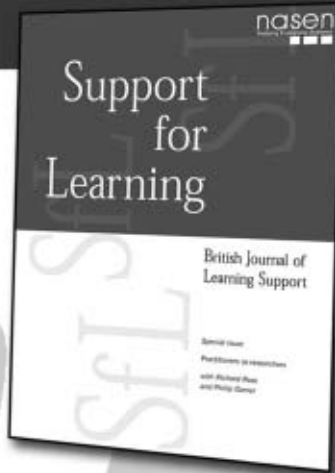
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