How do schools access and respond to the views of autistic pupils about their educational experiences? A qualitative study with partner schools from the ACoRNS project

Executive Summary

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Background

The most recent Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice (CoP) (Department for Education / Department of Health, 2015) has provided statutory guidance for local authorities and educational providers in England which mandates that all pupils with SEND have the right to express their views about their education. Correspondingly, local authorities and education providers have the responsibility to respond to the views and matters expressed by the pupil with SEND. The research literature suggests that pupils on the autism spectrum are particularly underrepresented when it comes to being provided with opportunities to express their views (Ellis, 2017) and that, even when they do, those views tend to come from older children and those who could respond verbally via semi-structured interviews (Fayette and Bond, 2018). This leads to a wider need for research that investigates the methods that schools use in order to support children from across the diversity of the autism spectrum to share their views and perspectives. This qualitative research project aimed to collect data from ACoRNS partner schools about the methods that they use to elicit the views of their pupils on the autism spectrum about their educational experiences.

Research Questions

1. What methods do schools use in order to explore and elicit the views of autistic pupils about their educational experiences?
2. What types of things are being asked about autistic pupils' educational provision and experiences?

Method

14 education professionals from a wide range of educational settings, spanning nursery to college and mainstream or specialist, took part in semi-structured interviews. Participants occupied varying roles including senior leadership, high-level teaching assistants, special educational needs coordinator, speech and language therapist, inclusion teacher, support workers and advisory teacher. The interviews were based on the participants' experiences and views of the methods they used for eliciting their autistic pupils' views, as well as the kinds of things that schools are interested in finding out more about from pupils' perspectives. Interviews lasted between 30 and 70 minutes, and participants were encouraged to show examples of methods used where feasible. Data were analysed thematically.

Key Findings

- Frequent informal/formal one-to-one discussions with their autistic pupils were amongst the most common method for eliciting pupils' views.
- Participants often expressed the importance of 'getting to know' each pupil individually; initiating an open dialogue with participants was often claimed to be one of the most effective ways of doing so.
- The majority of participants expressed the importance of celebrating and acknowledging the individual characteristics and interests of each pupil.
- Correspondingly, participants mentioned the importance of having positive relationships with their pupils in order for pupils to feel comfortable in sharing their views.
- Visual aids were found to be amongst the most common methods for facilitating the views of pupils, including Picture Exchange Communication Systems (PECS).
- School councils were mentioned by some participants as a method for eliciting views of pupils in making wider decisions about the school.
- Participants also identified annual reviews as an important space for eliciting pupils' views about their education experiences overall.
- Pupils' emotional needs were often being asked about. This commonly included the pupils' likes and dislikes about their educational provisions, environments, lessons and activities.

Conclusions

- The methods that the participants use in eliciting autistic pupils' views are highly dependent on the needs of the individual pupil.
- This highlights the importance of building strong and positive relationships with pupils and understanding their specific needs.
- The data showed that pupils were often being asked about their preferences in regards to matters effecting their education on a daily basis through open dialogue and conversation, as well as at more formal times such as annual reviews and school council meetings.
- The methods used by participants were largely based on social and verbal forms of communication, which supports the findings of Fayette and Bond (2018) who suggest that future research should focus on those autistic pupils who have highly limited verbal or social communication skills.
- There is clearly an opportunity within ACoRNS to find out more about how to reach the views of pupils who 'have no words' (Mortimer, 2004; p.170).

References

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