

## The participation of autistic pupils in decision-making about their school experiences: A case study of one school

### Executive Summary

**Chantelle Zilli** — DEdPsych Educational Psychology, University of Southampton  
Supervised by: **Dr Hanna Kovshoff & Professor Sarah Parsons**

#### Background

Pupil participation in decision-making is a topical issue in education research and practice, particularly in light of legislation that prioritises the full participation of children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in decisions that affect their lives (Department for Education (DfE) & Department for Health (DfH), 2015). This project focused on the participation of autistic pupils in decision-making as they are more likely to be overlooked due to communication and social interaction difficulties (Brewster & Coleyshaw, 2011). A systematic search of the literature showed that there is ample research on how autistic pupils participate in formal decision-making, such as transition planning meetings, rather than day-to-day decisions at school (e.g. Hatfield, Ciccarelli, Falkmer, & Falkmer, 2017). Moreover, much of this understanding is driven by large-scale survey data which provides insights into broad trends, but little detailed knowledge on the practices that take place in school. This project therefore aimed to conduct a qualitative case study of one school, intensively examining decision-making in a real-world context, from the perspectives of autistic pupils, their carers and the school staff who support them.

#### Research questions

1. What **practices** enable autistic pupils to participate in decision-making about their school experiences?
2. How are the **views** of autistic pupils used to **inform decisions** about their school experiences?
3. When do autistic pupils feel their **voices** have been **heard**?

#### Method

A case study of a specialist educational setting for pupils with a range of needs, including social, emotional and mental health difficulties and learning difficulties. In total, 18 people took part: 4 autistic pupils, 2 carers and 11 staff members. Over a period of 5 months, the autistic pupils were observed in three lessons and took part in a photo-voice activity. This is where pupils are asked to walk around the school with the researcher, and take photographs of the places where they felt listened to (or not) and the people who they felt listened to them (or not). Semi-structured interviews were completed with the carers and staff members. The Florian, Black-Hawkins and Rouse (2016) Framework for Participation provided the lens through which data were analysed.

#### Key findings

- The results captured four themes relating to effective practice: access to the school and the classroom, access to the curriculum, a focus on what learners can do, rather than what they cannot, and relationships of mutual recognition and acceptance between pupils and staff.
- Every pupil valued having a 'timeout area' where they take breaks and saw this as a helpful strategy for staying in lessons.
- Their timeout areas represented places in the school where pupils felt most listened to by staff.

- Pupils felt able to take decisions around when to use timeouts because of the flexibility of the school.
- Pupils had regular opportunities to contribute to decisions about lesson content and school resources. This appeared to be driven by staff values which highlighted the importance of engaging pupils in their education and using pupil expertise.
- Some pupils enjoyed taking decisions about their learning such as choosing lesson topics whereas for others, this could be a source of anxiety.
- Relationships with staff were important to all pupils. All pupils felt listened to with staff across the school, from the senior leadership team to individual tutors.
- Staff suggest that the relationship with pupils enables them to share their views.
- All pupils identified extra-curricular activities where they felt listened to by peers and/or staff.
- Getting to know pupil interests is a strategy viewed as helpful by both staff and pupils for building positive relationships.
- Staff frequently referred to the importance of 'negotiation' and 'compromise' which created outcomes that were acceptable to pupils and staff. There were many examples of scripts that staff use which support this process such as staff explaining to pupils reasons behind a decision and explaining the options available.
- Decision-making was part of a whole-school approach rather than an autism-specific strategy.
- Carers provided views on parent-school collaboration but not on how pupils participate in decision-making at school.

### Implications and conclusions

- A culture that promotes flexibility in school systems may enable pupils to make decisions about how and when they learn.
- Practitioners should consider where the curriculum is more flexible, and where opportunities could be created for pupils to directly influence the activities they do in school.
- Decision-making is a skill that needs to be learnt and supported. Staff should provide pupils with additional information and guidance as some may find decision-making anxiety provoking.
- Carers may not have insights into the day-to-day practices in schools. Schools should make this explicit by sharing information on how their children participate in decision-making at school.
- Practices at the case school suggest that a partnership approach to decision-making is helpful for creating actions that are agreeable to both staff and pupils. This involves staff and pupils sharing the power in making decisions through negotiation, joint goals and reciprocal feedback.
- Building relationships with pupils may be important for enabling participation in decision-making. This echoes research highlighting that relationships impact what pupils feel able to say and which voices are heard (e.g. Mannion, 2007).
- Schools should ask pupils about what helps them to feel listened to, as they can provide valuable insights into practices that are effective and areas for development.
- The use of photo-voice methods was effective in eliciting the perspectives of autistic pupils. This approach could be adapted for use in school practice and other forms of research which involves autistic pupils.

### References

- Brewster, S., & Coleyshaw, L. (2011). Participation or exclusion? Perspectives of pupils with autistic spectrum disorders on their participation in leisure activities. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 39(4), 284–291.
- Department for Education (DfE) & Department of Health (DfH). (2015). Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years. Government consultation response., (June). Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25>
- Florian, L., Black-Hawkins, K., & Rouse, M. (2016). *Achievement and inclusion in schools* (Second). Routledge.
- Hatfield, M., Ciccarelli, M., Falkmer, T., & Falkmer, M. (2017). Factors related to successful transition planning for adolescents on the autism spectrum. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*. <http://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12388>
- Mannion, G. (2007). Going Spatial, Going Relational: Why "listening to children" and children's participation needs reframing. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 28(3), 405–420. <http://doi.org/10.1080/01596300701458970>