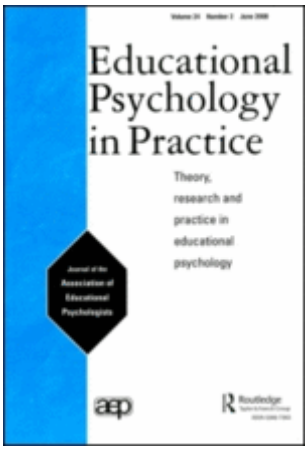

Academic progress through the lenses of children with SEN. An IPA study.

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In September 2014, the law relating to children and young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN) changed and a new SEN Code of Practice was introduced. Data available to date is inconsistent when exploring implementation of these SEN reforms for the progress of children receiving support for SEN. This said, available data indicates that the progress of these pupils is significantly behind when considering achievement all pupils, and that nationally there is considerable variation in their progress.

In this exploratory study, qualitative methodology was used to elicit the concept of academic progress from the viewpoint of a small group of pupils with SEN. Six children having a variety of SEN from a mainstream primary school were recruited. Their views were ascertained using semi-structured interview technique and transcripts were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Four master themes emerged from the analysis: A process for future gains, (Defined by) outside checks, Various influences and Associated feelings. Each theme is discussed and exemplified by quotes from the participants.

Findings are discussed in relation to relevant psychological theory and research. Implications are explored for Educational Psychologists, and for those working in wider educational contexts.

Keywords: special educational needs, additional needs, academic progress, perceptions, education, pupil voice.

Introduction and background

Subsequent to the Children and Families Act 2014, a new SEN Code of Practice (CoP, DfE, 2015) was introduced, which reshapes the legislative guidance for schools and all those working in education, in relation to children and young people with SEN. The terms that educational settings use to identify and meet the needs of children with SEN through a graduated response in now described as 'SEN Support'. Of note for this

group, a recent report released by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills concludes that whilst identifying, assessing and supporting the needs of children and young people with Statements or Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) has well been established, schools have engaged on a less consistent basis in gathering of information regarding the progress of pupils receiving SEN support (Ofsted, 2016). This is in the context of 11.6% of all children in education in England receiving SEN Support, as latest national statistics indicate (DfE, 2017). The progress of pupils with SEN has historically been significantly behind peers. DfE (2018) published data indicates that only 18% of students with SEN reach expected Key Stage 2 standards in reading, writing and mathematics, compared with 70% of peers with no SEN.

Literature search

A systematic literature review (Fink, 2005, Baumeister, 2013) was undertaken in May 2018 using Academic Search Complete, ERIC, Education Research Complete, PsycINFO and PsycARTICLES databases. The study was exploratory and thus the authors opted to review primary research rather than theory in this literature review. The review, searching for research papers exploring factors affecting the academic progress of children with SEN, identified a surprisingly small amount of relevant studies (Figure 1). Identified research focuses primarily on (1) the impact of inclusion for these pupils' academic progress, with fewer looking at (2) teacher, parental, or pupil perceptions. These two areas will be explored below.

Figure 1. Literature review representation

1) The impact of inclusion for the academic progress of pupils with SEN

All studies investigating the impact of inclusion on academic progress adopted quantitative methodologies. In Switzerland, Dessemontet et al. (2012) used two groups of 34 children with intellectual disabilities, taught in mainstream classrooms and special education placement, respectively, and investigated a variety of factors, including academic achievement, over two years. Regarding academic achievement, the analysis identified that pupils in mainstream classroom made significantly better progress in literacy than peers in special education, though the effect size was small; no significant differences were found in maths. Similarly, Szumski & Karwowski (2014) assessed the effectiveness of integrative and inclusive education in Poland, aiming to establish whether pupils with mild intellectual disabilities attending mainstream, integrative and special schools differed in terms of their school achievements. The sample included 859 participants and analysis concluded that children in inclusive forms of education achieve significantly better in maths and reading tests than those in special schools. Tremblay (2013) in Belgium compared attainment in inclusive and special education classes. A total of 28 students from twelve inclusive classes and thirteen special education classes participated, which were matched for attainment levels at the start of the experiment (October) and were re-tested eight months later (June). Whilst their scores were not different in October, those in inclusive classes scored significantly better in reading and writing, but not in maths, in June. In Netherlands, Ruijs et al. (2010) used a big sample of 1839 primary school children with SEN to investigate factors influencing attainment of children with SEN in inclusive education. Ruijs et al. explored, amongst others, differences in academic achievement between pupils who were the only ones with additional needs in a class, versus being in a class with others with additional needs. For academic achievement, no significant correlations were found between the two groups.

Overall, the studies above suggest that children with SEN may attain better in inclusive education than in segregated provision, and the group size of children with SEN in a mainstream class is irrelevant for their attainment. It is important to note those attending a specialist provision may by nature have more significant SEN than those in a mainstream provision; thus comparison of progress between the contexts should be undertaken with some caution. None of the studies were undertaken in England, with its own cultural difference in teaching and learning of children with SEN; moreover, none explored what, from the environments studied, may influence the level of achievement for the children with SEN.

2) Perceptions on academic progress of pupils with SEN

No article was identified to explore parental views on children's academic progress, for children with SEN. There are however few publications exploring teacher and pupils with SEN's perceptions.

With regard to teachers' perceptions of the progress of children with SEN, the two studies identified presented yet again quantitative methodologies and used Scottish, respectively New Zealand participants (Brady & Woolfson, 2008, Monsen & Frederickson, 2004). Both identified that the way (intrinsic versus environmental factors) in which teachers attribute learning difficulties to pupils and the perceptions they have regarding inclusion are important in pupils' progress and wellbeing.

Regarding children with SEN's perceptions, the two papers identified focused primarily on participants' preferences for inclusive schooling. Both used qualitative designs in Ireland and England (Prunty et al., 2012, Curtin and Clarke, 2005) and found mixed perceptions related to benefits of mainstream versus special schooling. The key

learnings may probably be that individual pupils provide valuable insights into schooling and their views and experiences should be considered, when shaping educational planning.

Overall, the authors identified a distinctively scarce literature exploring perceptions relating to the progress of children with SEN. The study in this article is a starting point to explore perceptions regarding progress, of a group that seems to have been left out in research, and to bring into prominence the individual experiences and views of children with SEN.

This article describes how a group of children with SEN understands the concept of academic progress and how they think their progress can be supported. More specifically, it addressed one main question: What meaning do children with SEN assign to academic progress and what do they think makes them improve?, divided into two sub-research questions: What does getting better at school mean for children identified as needing SEN Support? What do these children think helps them to get better in school? The study is hoped to provide an exploratory beginning in an area significantly understudied, despite a re-emphasised ethos in SEN legislation on taking children's views into account when planning their future progress.

Epistemological stance and methods

This study adopted a phenomenological stance, as academic progress was assumed to be a phenomenon constructed individually; each participant's perception of academic progress is considered to be unique to his / her constructed reality, and guided by their lived experience. Participants' constructions of progress were explored via individual interviews and data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Ethical approval was sought and obtained from the relevant academic Research Ethics Committee. The study complied with British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2014) and Health & Care Professional Council's guidance for conduct and ethics for students (HCPC, 2016). Pseudonyms were used for participants in subsequent writings.

Data Collection

Participants' selection

A homogenous sample (as recommended by Smith et al, 2009) was selected. This was achieved by involving participants solely from one school, on SEN Support (and without a Statement or EHCP). Purposive sampling of pupils in key stage 2 (ages 8-11) was used, as the authors identified significant evidence that during middle childhood (6-12 years old) children are more likely to express insightful psychological reflections on self and others (e.g. Damon and Hart, 1998; Harter, 1998). All final six participants were in year 4 (and age 9), had been on their school's SEN Support register for at least one academic year and were receiving SEN Support at the time of data being collected. In the school recruited, additional support included further explanation of tasks, differentiated work and teaching in small groups on occasion.

Interviews

A semi-structured interview schedule was drafted and sent to the SENCo of the participating school; following this, alterations were made to ensure that questions were posed at an appropriate level for the participants' language development. A further pilot interview allowed for the research questions to be practiced with a pupil who matched the targeted population. Following this, the interview was finalised.

Participants were met with twice; once to build rapport and again for the interview.

Analysis

Data was analysed using IPA principles (Smith et al., 2009, Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2011), as the study aimed to explore children's understanding and experiences of academic progress. Specifically, the six-step process proposed by Smith et al. (2011) was used.

Findings

Data analysis placed the participants' conceptualisation of academic progress into four master themes. Firstly, a theme which sees academic progress as an ongoing process which has relevance for the participants' future lives; secondly, as a concept defined by outside checks. Thirdly, academic progress as influenced by children's own features as well as others' and fourthly, as promoting positive, as well as negative feelings. The four master themes of the study are listed in the first line in Table 1, together with their respective superordinate themes underneath. Further description of each of the master themes with examples from participants' transcripts will follow.

Table 1. Final Master and Superordinate themes of academic progress

Master theme 1: A process for future gains

This theme (Figure 2), described how participants understood progress as an ongoing process which would help them in the future.

Figure 2. Master theme 1 with its accompanying superordinate theme.

All participants stated that getting better in school was important, and reasons given alluded to their futures, with some thinking to high school and college and some thinking into their future lives as adults. There was suggestion from participants that their current progress was important to help them in the latter stages of their education. Tim, for instance, seemed to identify progress as learning and passing tests both now and in the future, in relation to attending secondary school: *"if you don't learn stuff now, when you want to, say you wanted to get in 11+ or something, a good high school… you need to learn stuff so you can pass the test."* Others thought beyond school and to their future careers, seemingly associating progress in primary school with having a job when they are older. The way participants spoke suggested that not doing well now, therefore not getting a good job in the future, would represent a form of failure, as Lily's account exemplifies: *"Erm because if you don't get better, then when you get older if you when you do like exams and stuff (…) If you don't get them right you could not get a job."*

When discussing why getting better is important, most of the participants seemed to focus on materialistic gains in the future, such as getting a good job or making plenty of money. None mentioned doing well for an intrinsic motivation or psychological gain; nonetheless they did use their own perceived improvements to express progress. There was a sense that making progress would set them up for a successful future, and not getting better in school would lead to the opposite.

As well as looking to the future, participants also conceptualised progress as a process happening over time and being signified by improvement. For some this journey happened between two points in time; for others the journey was represented by a positive change, such as being better at doing something now than they were in the

past. When describing the process, the participants used symbolic or concrete tools to support their expression of complex and abstract concepts such as time and progress. David for example, used stones:

David: "Ok I'm going to get two stones out of my pocket...So this is when you start the year…And this is when you finish the year."

Interviewer: "So you go from a tiny stone to a big stone."

David: "Pretty much."

As already alluded to, progress was also described as change; it represented the movement between two points. For some this was explained as the movement from being bad, to good, at something, *"Like you like you weren't very good and now you've like got better" (Tim),* whereas others described the movement as more extreme, representing the difference between failing something and succeeding at it.

Some participants provided examples that represented small movement; only referring to the next time they did something to explain progress:

Interviewer: "So if someone said to you, Emma, you're making really good progress in your maths, what would that mean?"

Emma: "Erm that next time I do it I might get them all right again."

Others nonetheless defined the movement over a much longer time period: *"It means like it means when you're when you're erm so like if you're little and you don't know how to write your name or something… Then the teachers teach you and you learn how to write it." (Lily)*

David was the only participant to represent his time frame for progress from the beginning of the academic year to the end. His use of the word "supposed" could indicate that he felt reality may not always be the same as expectations: *"And September, September the first ones well September the cold piece which you're not really supposed to get that many right. Then erm summer the warm piece when you're supposed to improve."*

Master theme 2: (Defined by) outside checks

This theme (Figure 3), identified the sources participants used as indicators of progress, both in and outside of school. Interestingly, all made reference to external checks of progress.

Figure 3. Master theme 2 with its accompanying superordinate themes

Getting things right appeared to be the most significant indicator for participants to define progress; additionally, knowing how well they were doing in school helped them in their appreciation of progress. Some participants quantified their progress by checking how many of tasks they get correct: *"Erm you'll get more questions right." (Tim), or "Er, when we come to the marking I get them all like right well some of them at least the ones like I practised, then I practise the ones that I don't get and then." (Gemma)*

Participants also referred to the type of marks they received in their books and how they gave an indication of how well they were doing:

Interviewer: "… so how do you know you're doing well in your lessons?

David: "Erm, there's barely any green marks in my book"

Interviewer: "And what do green marks mean?"

David: "Fail!"

Despite the concrete feedback explained above, participants found it difficult at this stage to translate the dots and ticks they see in their books, or the number of questions they get correct, into knowledge of their learning.

The children also expressed in varying forms how they use reinforcement and feedback from outside sources to define how well they are doing both in and outside of school. Some referred to work being shown to the class as an indicator of progress, both their own progress and the progress of peers; others mentioned specific reinforcers that help them know how well they are doing, such as gold stars or certificates.

When discussing feedback, participants seemed to pay particular attention to that received from teachers to help them define their progress, and teacher's praise was an important indicator:

Interviewer: "...how do you know if you're doing well or not?"

Lily: "Erm... sometimes like my teacher tells you"

Interviewer: "Yep and what might the teacher say?"

Lily: "Well done."

Interestingly, some participants referenced their teacher when specifically asked to name a person within school who tells them they are doing well, whereas others referenced their teachers when asked how they knew that they were making progress or doing well. This demonstrates the significance of the teacher in defining progress to the children, as participants used their teacher as their source of knowledge for how well they were doing.

Master theme 3: Various influences

This theme (Figure 4) illustrated the various influences on progress, in participants' views. This master theme had prominence in participants' accounts and is particularly rich, containing superordinate as well as emergent themes.

Figure 4. Master theme 3 with its accompanying superordinate themes

When exploring influences, participants focused on the effect of adults and peers on their progress. There was a variation in the way in which participants viewed the influence of their peers. Some mentioned peers throughout their interviews and noted the positive aspects of peers supporting their progress. Some found peers to be a source of help and feedback, some used peers as a source for comparison which seemed to be helpful sometimes and not so helpful other times. Some spoke particularly positively regarding their peers, valuing their feedback:

> *Interviewer: "So at school, who tells you that you're doing well in your work?"*
>
> *Emma: "Sometimes my friends and the Miss'."*

Emma also talked about both giving help to her friends and receiving help from them:

> *Interviewer: "Ok, how do you know if your friends are getting better?"*
>
> *Emma: "Erm.. if when we have… when your friends ask you something, and, you look at their work and you say it's getting better keep going and you might get them right."*

Some participants mentioned wanting to receive feedback from friends and expressed a preference to this over receiving feedback from an adult. For some, peers

were a source of comparison in terms of progress: *"...like I always ask them like how much do you get? Cause I'm on the hardest like the full grid but I don't do my twelves 'cause I can't really do them." (Gemma).* Gemma described how she purposefully asked peers what level they were on with timetables because she knew she was doing well with them, in this instance her self-esteem was boosted as she was working on higher level than her peers. Others expressed a preference to mark the work of peers who would not do as well as them but did not want to mark the work of someone who may do better than them.

As with discussing feedback received, for most participants, the teacher seemed to be a significant adult in terms of influence on their progress, they talked about their teachers helping them to learn or helping them to get better:

Interviewer: "So who do you think helps you to learn things in school?"

Susan: "Erm teachers"

What varied between participants was what they found helpful about what their teachers did. Some used their teacher to help them understand something, giving specific examples:

Interviewer: "And what does the teacher do?"

Lily: "Erm sometimes if there's some children who aren't, like they don't get it that very well, she like takes them away from all the other children and teaches them by herself."

In comparison, others focused their discussion on their parents but seemed to find it hard to describe what their parents did that was helpful. This was in contrast to

the specific examples described regarding teachers. David was the only participant to not mention his teacher as much and he in fact demonstrated a preference for receiving help from the class teaching assistants (TAs):

Interviewer: "And are there any adults in school that help you get better?"

David: "A few."

Interviewer: "Like who?"

David: "Erm I can't. You've got like the MDAs no not MDAs, you've got helpers, you know the helpers?"

Interviewer: "Yeah like classroom TAs do you mean? Like teaching assistants?"

David: "Yeah"

He seemed to feel as if teaching assistants were able to give him more time compared to teachers.

Throughout the interviews, participants also spoke about themselves in a way that reflected their own influences on their progress. Some highlighted a level of self-awareness when talking about their progress in school and the things they can find difficult, as well as the aspects they are good at. Additionally, some also demonstrated self-awareness in knowing what level of difficulty they were capable of trying, describing levels of work set in class and deciding whether to challenge themselves.

Interestingly, David was the only participant to show some self-awareness of his additional needs and talked about how they influence his learning, and how they influence the way he is treated by others within school. He seemed angry that school do not seem to recognise these difficulties:

Interviewer: "Is there anyone, anything anyone in school could do to help you more?"

David: "Definitely, realise that I have ADHD and autism for once."

There was a sense from the participants that resilience was key in their progress, particularly by using of perseverance and repeated practise when they found something difficult.

Interviewer: And if you did an answer wrong what would you do next? To help you get better?

Gemma: "Err keep practising at home and keep practising like at school."

Participants indicated that they felt it was important that they keep trying, even if they felt upset that they were finding things hard.

Participants also showed an awareness of how the approach they took to their learning was having an impact. Some referred to using prior experience, whilst others described themselves as active learners. Some talked about seeking feedback which indicated that they took an active role in class, although they did not necessarily give an indication that they knew whether such role was helpful. Others specifically mentioned themselves when talking about what helps them to get better:

Interviewer: "And who do you think helps you to get better?"

Gemma: "Err… Miss. Sometimes I like help myself."

David indicated that he knew the importance of the approach one takes to learning and how this may impact on progress.

David: "… and then you need to push yourself to the absolute LIMIT"

He also talked about the difference in grades between people who pay attention and those who do not, and the importance of trial and error until he finds a method that works best.

Master theme 4: Associated feelings

This theme (Figure 5) portrayed the feelings that the participants associated with the concept of progress. A variety of emotions seemed to be experienced by participants, some positive and some negative.

Figure 5. Master theme 4 with its accompanying superordinate themes

Several of the participants expressed feeling happy when they are doing well in school:

Interviewer: "So how do you feel when you're doing well at school?"

Gemma: "Really happy"

Some commented on the association between doing well and happiness confidently. Others were more tentative in their responses, which could have indicated that they were not used to reflect on how they felt in relation to their progress in school. Some participants had to be specifically asked about an internal representation before they could identify with a feeling that they associated with progress.

For some participants, feeling a sense of pride in their achievements in school was mentioned:

Interviewer: "Can you tell me how you feel when you're doing well at school?"

David: "Proud"

Participants also referred to negative emotions when discussing their progress. These emotions seemed to relate to instances when participants were finding something difficult or not doing as well as they would like:

Gemma: "Because I was really angry that I couldn't do it…"

Emma: "Erm I would feel upset and next time I'll keep trying to get it right"

Emma's response suggests she would do something constructive with her emotion and use it to help her persevere the next time she tries something. In contrast, Gemma just stated that she was *"really angry"* and she gave no indication of how she could use this emotion to help her in the future.

There were also negative emotions expressed when the participants discussed their progress in comparison to peers. For some this was anger, for others it was embarrassment: *"You would be humiliated, you'd be shouted at and you'd get forced to stay in" (David).*

There was a sense from some participants that they may not be used to discussing their feelings in relation to their progress in school. It did not seem to be natural to some to mention feelings and even when directly asked some of them paused before responding.

Summary

The four overarching master themes described above represent the understanding of six Y4 pupils with SEN regarding academic progress. The IPA analysis undertaken suggests that the participating pupils understood progress as a process; that external sources are a key indicator for them to monitor and understand the progress they are making, and both external and internal sources of reference have an impact upon their

progress; finally, the participants' perceived sense of progress is related to specific negative and / or positive feelings.

Discussion

This study sought to address one main question: What meaning do children with SEN assign to academic progress and what do they think makes them improve?, divided into two sub-research questions: What does getting better at school mean for children identified as needing SEN Support? What do these children think helps them to get better in school? Four master themes were identified, as explored in the section above.

Master theme 1 alluded to the way in which participants view progress as an ongoing process. All participants deemed making progress in school to be important and the reasons given were related to supporting their future lives. Interestingly, other research has already suggested that children as young as four can begin to make decisions that affect their future (e.g. Moore et al., 1998). Additionally, by age seven, children seem to reach a developmental stage where they begin to have more realistic aspirations for the future rather than fantasising about it (Moulton et al., 2015).

Gottfredson's (1981) Circumscription and Compromise model (nb: a developmental theory of occupational aspirations) postulates that there are four stages of development that children experience with regards to self-concept and occupational preferences. Stage Three of the model is when children begin to resemble adults in the way that they view society; considering who and what are valued highly. During this stage children also tend to aspire to careers that are deemed prestigious, as they are motivated by money and social value. All participants in this study fall into Stage Three of Gottfredson's model in terms of their age (age 9-13 years). Moreover, career aspirations related to this stage were also represented in some of the participants'

responses. Educators may need to be mindful of these stages when discussing the future career aspirations of all children, as what is deemed important by children will vary according to their age or development.

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991) is also relevant within the first master theme. When talking about the impact of their current progress on their future lives, the participants' answers suggest some sense of autonomy. The pupils are aware that what they achieve in primary school in the present will have an impact on their futures. This said, participants seem extrinsically, rather than intrinsically motivated, as none referred to progress being important because it would give them a sense of achievement, curiosity or other intrinsic motivator; instead, almost all the participants referred to extrinsic motivators such as becoming wealthy or having a high-status job. This could have implications for the extent to which children achieve their best and work within the best possible environment for optimal functioning.

The second master theme explores the indicators which helped the participants monitor their progress, expressed by children in concrete information, such as 'scores' and 'marks'. This tendency to prefer concrete rather than abstract symbols of success, is deemed as appropriate for children's age and subsequent developmental stage (research has shown that until the age of at least 10, children have a natural preference towards concrete symbols and concepts – e.g. Schwanenflugel, 1991). The way in which the participants define their progress in terms of outside checks, such as getting things right, may reflect the human tendency to simplify and potentially catastrophise in some situations. Originating from research on depression (Beck, 1972), catastrophising is a type of cognitive distortion that can underlie human thinking. An example of this was

provided by David, who stated that receiving 'green marks' in his book was an indication of failure; rather than viewing these marks as an opportunity to improve or an indication that he is yet to learn something to fluency, he catastrophises that these marks mean he has failed. This tendency may also suggest the thinking style of the participants being related to fixed mindset, rather than growth mindset (Dweck, 2006), and educators may wish to consider promoting a growth mindset philosophy within the classroom.

The third master theme reflects the influences on progress from the participants' perspective. Theories of child development suggest that within late childhood and adolescence, young people become interested in how they appear to others, and they may be increasingly self-conscious about themselves and their situations, in comparison to those around them (e.g. Erikson, 1959). The discrepancies in how peers are viewed by the participants in this research may be indicative of variations in their social and emotional development. Johnson & Johnson's (1975) theory of cooperative learning emphasises that encouraging students to work together to achieve academic goals alleviates the competitive elements of individual learning. Working together allows pupils to capitalise on each other's skills and furthermore, cooperative learning has also been linked to increased pupil satisfaction (Maxwell-Stuart et al., 2016). The influence of teachers was also significant for most of the participants, with only one mentioning the TA, and not the teacher, as a significant adult. Research has shown that often children with SEN do not have enough quality time with their teachers and there can be an over-reliance on TAs to support SEN children to the detriment of their learning. Webster & Blatchford (2013) found that students with high level SEN receiving the most TA support made significantly less academic progress than similar pupils who received much less support. The findings from the current study could therefore indicate

that the school may use TA support effectively for these children as the participants' teachers remain significant for their progress. The deployment of TAs is an essential element for consideration within schools to ensure that children with SEN are supported in the most effective way to facilitate progress.

The participants also alluded to a range of factors related to themselves that seemed pertinent to their understanding of progress - this suggests they are beginning to self-regulate their learning. There is a wealth of research regarding self-regulated learning theory (e.g. Zimmerman, 1986), with self-regulated learners taking an active role in their learning, motivationally, behaviourally and metacognitively; learners that display these characteristics are also more likely to achieve academic success (Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1988). The fact that some participants alluded to these tendencies whilst others did not imply that in education more could be done to encourage these self-regulatory behaviours, to foster success.

The final master theme encapsulates the various feelings the participants mentioned when considering the concept of progress. As Erikson's theory postulates (Erikson, 1959), between the ages of 5-12, children are in the 'competence' stage of psychosocial development. Erikson viewed these years as crucial for the development of self-confidence; children of this age become much more aware of themselves as individuals. The differences in feelings expressed by the participants could reflect various parts of this stage of development. The participants did not seem to be used to discussing feelings associated with progress, it may therefore be pertinent to introduce these discussions into the classroom, especially considering the impact upon self-confidence.

Limitations and future directions

The study used purposive sampling which can be criticised as being judgemental and subjective, therefore lending it to be highly prone to researcher bias (Dudovskiy, 2018). However, these criticisms are only relevant if a researcher cannot justify the reason for their sampling method, i.e. the judgements they have made are not based on clear rationale. In this study, the rationale for purposive sampling was that it would be beneficial to recruit a school that shared motivation to complete the research. It was also important that the participants selected met all inclusion criteria and were able to access the interview; purposive sampling allowed for this. Furthermore, IPA studies tend to use a purposive sampling method as usually the aim is to explore a phenomenon and answer a research question related to a specific group, for whom the research question holds relevance (Smith et al., 2011).

Generalisability was not an aim of this research and due to the nature of the sample and research aim, generalisability of results should be approached with caution. The findings represent one small group of participants with SEN receiving SEN Support in one primary school. The findings do not, therefore, claim to represent all children with SEN, although some relevant reflections and learning are relevant. The sample in this research was homogenous in many ways. However, there were differences within the sample. For example, the participants had varying SEN, which could have impacted on the meaning they associate with progress.

Ways in which this research could be extended and added to in the future to provide supplementary insights into this individually understood phenomenon have been considered. It would be interesting to explore any differences between the interpretations of this sample and the interpretations of a sample of children who are perhaps more acutely aware of their SEN, such as children who have been granted an

EHCP. Furthermore, it would be useful to consider any differences in interpretations of progress of children with no additional needs. In a similar vein, future research could explore the extent to which meaning assigned to progress may vary with age and SEN features and a model of academic progress and its influences might be achieved for children with SEN with future research.

Implications and conclusions

The findings from this study are relevant both in the field of Educational Psychology, and to the wider education context. This research has indicated that EPs could play a role in highlighting and making available key theory and practice relevant to supporting children with SEN to achieve their best:

- The participants in this study demonstrated that they respond well to extrinsic motivators. It may be therefore pertinent for EPs to highlight the theory underpinning why this can be successful to educational settings, and encourage the use of extrinsic motivators, at least in the initial stages of engagement with learning and promoting progress.

- The findings suggest that the participants were primarily extrinsically and not intrinsically motivated. This is a successful strategy for encouraging desired behaviour. However, there is strong evidence, including from SDT, in the literature, arguing that extrinsic motivation is not best to promote long term optimal functioning and growth. Instead, perhaps EPs and educators should foster intrinsic motivation in all students, alongside supporting the three psychological needs that SDT states are crucial.

- For some of the participants, success in school seemed to be constructed in an 'all or nothing' manner. This could imply that the participants have a fixed rather than growth mindset. Although disputed (Sisk et al., 2018), the principles of growth mindset could be encouraged to support students to understand that their progress can change and improve, with perseverance and positive attitude, alongside a supportive environment. In addition, this approach will provide an alternative to the catastrophising way in which some of the participants seemed to view progress.

- As children of the age of those in this research start to become more self-conscious and compare themselves to their peers, perhaps the principles of cooperative learning theory are important. As indicated in the findings, some participants found the comparison of themselves to peers as threatening. If pupils were encouraged to work together to achieve common goals, carefully mediated by an adult, rather than work as individuals, they may find comparison with peers less of a threat, and more of a celebration.

- According to SDT, to achieve personal fulfilment and the best possible growth, people need to have three basic psychological needs met: competence, relatedness and autonomy. It is therefore important that children who sometimes have less opportunity to express their views, such as those in this study, are given ample and safe opportunities to develop skills that will empower them. They should also be given opportunities to ensure that their voices are heard. This can be achieved through encouraging self-regulation skills such as those described in Zimmerman's (1986) self-regulated learning theory. Ultimately, the authors believe that children should be supported and encouraged to be self-

advocates; to equip them with the skills to voice what is important to them.

Concluding remarks

This study explored the way in which a small group of primary aged children with SEN conceptualise academic progress. The findings provide a greater, detailed understanding of how the participants interpret their progress in school, what influences them and what feelings they attribute to the process. Whilst the study has made a unique contribution to a topic not yet widely researched, the authors hope that learning from this study will inform practice for EPs and educators alike.

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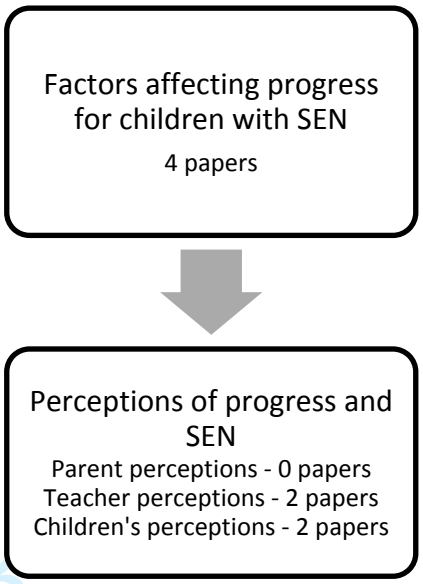

Figure 1. Literature review representation

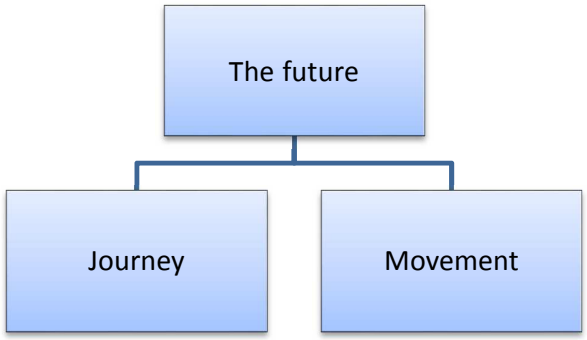

Figure 2. Master theme 1 with its accompanying superordinate theme.

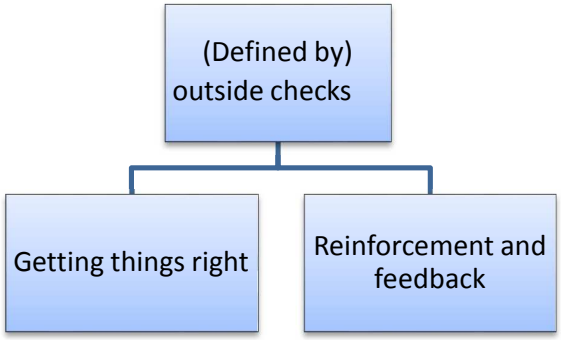

Figure 3. Master theme 2 with its accompanying superordinate themes

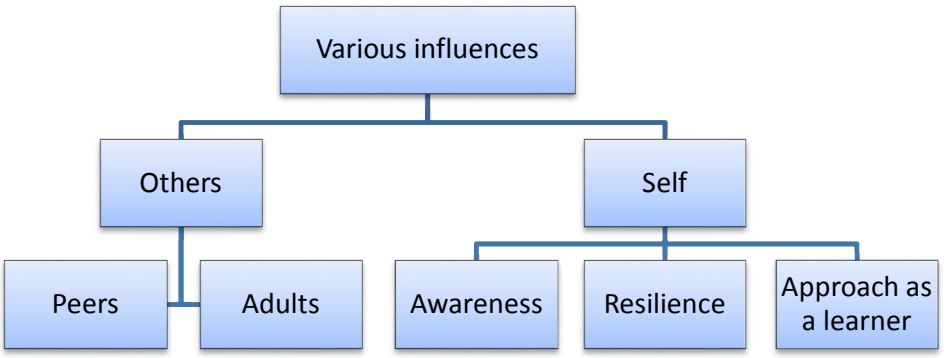

Figure 4. Master theme 3 with its accompanying superordinate themes

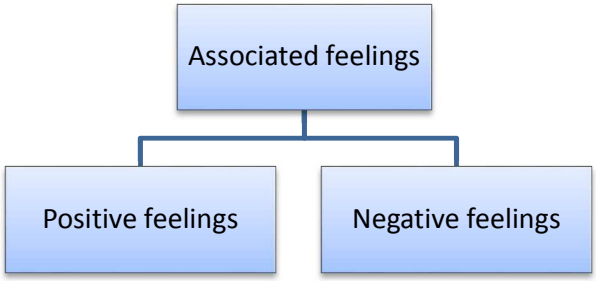

Figure 5. Master theme 4 with its accompanying superordinate themes

A process for future gains	**(Defined by) outside checks**	**Various influences**	**Associated feelings**
The future	Getting things right	Others	Positive feelings
Journey	Reinforcement and feedback	Self	Negative feelings
Movement			

Table 1. Final Master and Superordinate themes of academic progress