

## 1 **Introduction**

2 The inclusion agenda in England and elsewhere in the world has been guided by  
3 international human rights agreements, educational legislation and policies that have  
4 promoted the ideology of securing a better future for children and young people with  
5 special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). In 1994, the UNESCO Salamanca  
6 Statement was agreed by 92 governments and 25 international organisations and called  
7 for the inclusion of all children and young people with SEND to be the norm. The guiding  
8 principle was that ‘ordinary’ schools should accommodate all children and young people,  
9 regardless of physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions.  
10 Further endorsing the principle of inclusive education is the UN Convention on the Rights  
11 of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). This human rights treaty ratified not  
12 only the right of children and young people with SEND to receive education without  
13 discrimination (Article 24) but, most importantly, their right to express their views on all  
14 matters affecting them (Article 12); to maximum participation regardless of their  
15 disability (Article 23); and an entitlement to discipline in schools that is administered  
16 with due respect for their human rights (Article 28).

17 In 1997, in England, a country with a long tradition in special education, the new  
18 Labour government published the Green Paper *Excellence for All Children: Meeting*  
19 *Special Educational Needs*, thereby giving support to the Salamanca Statement.  
20 Subsequent initiatives and legislation to safeguard the rights of children and young people  
21 with SEND followed, which included the 2001 Special Educational Needs and Disability  
22 Act and the 2001 SEN Code of Practice. The 2001 Act stated for the first time that  
23 discrimination, exclusion, rejection or intentional refusal of a child or young person with  
24 SEND admission to a school was an infringement of their rights and, hence, deemed

25 unlawful. Additionally, the 2001 SEN Code of Practice recognised the right of children  
26 and young people with SEND to be involved in decision making and to express an opinion  
27 on any matter affecting their lives. The Children and Families Act (2014) and the revised  
28 Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice: 0-25 years (2014),  
29 further emphasised participation from children and young people with SEND. **All the**  
30 **above-mentioned enactments were ratified with the intent to transforming pupils with**  
31 **SEND from being passive recipients into active participants.**

### 32 **What do children and young people with SEND report about their school** 33 **experiences?**

34 In recent years, there has been increasing interest in educational research in eliciting the  
35 voices of children and young people with SEND on their mainstream and special school  
36 experiences. Overall, the findings indicate that they *are* capable of expressing their views  
37 and feelings (O'Connor, Hodkinson, Burton, & Torstensson, 2011; Cafai & Cooper,  
38 2010), can make pertinent suggestions for school improvement (Loyd, 2013), provide  
39 constructive feedback for teaching and learning (Blackman, 2011; Kubiak, 2017) and,  
40 most importantly, can contribute positively to promoting school reform and inclusive  
41 practice (Adderley et al., 2015). Cafai and Cooper (2010), for example, in a review of  
42 **eight** small-scale qualitative studies, reported the reasons given by secondary-aged pupils  
43 with SEMH (previously social, emotional and behavioural) difficulties for their struggle  
44 to fit into mainstream schools. **All studies involved an average number of 14 participants**  
45 **attending special or mainstream secondary settings in Malta. Findings indicated that**  
46 **pupils' experiences were summarised under** five main themes: poor relationships with  
47 teachers; victimisation; a sense of oppression and powerlessness; unconnected learning  
48 experiences; exclusion and stigmatisation.

49 Similarly, Sellman (2009) sought to explore the perspectives of secondary-aged  
50 pupils on their school's behaviour policy by forming a student research group. The  
51 research group consisted of six young adolescents (aged 13-16) attending a special school  
52 for SEMH in the English Midlands. Following seven meetings, pupils voiced the need  
53 for clarity and consistency in implementation of a behaviour management policy, positive  
54 relationships with teachers and good communication. In another UK study, Sheffield and  
55 Morgan (2017) employed a constructionist grounded theory methodology to elicit the  
56 mainstream school experiences of nine young adolescents aged 13-16 with an SEMH  
57 identification. Qualitative data were analysed thematically. The themes of 'struggles' and  
58 'strengths' were identified, with teacher-pupil relationships and receiving additional  
59 support contributing to both themes. Acknowledgement of the academic and  
60 interpersonal strengths of the young people by teachers and peers was positively viewed,  
61 as was the possibility of 'becoming a different person'. Examination opportunities were  
62 perceived by the young people as being positive motivators for success. None of the  
63 young people interviewed were aware they had a statement of special educational needs  
64 or an education, health and care (EHC) plan or were cognisant of the SEMH label being  
65 applied to them; all evaluated this label negatively. Somewhat in contrast, Norwich and  
66 Kelly (2004), who sought the views on inclusion of 101 pupils with MLD (age 10-11 and  
67 13-14), found that the majority of young people held positive views about school and  
68 reported that the main facilitators of their inclusion was the quality of support they  
69 received at school and having intimate relations with their peers.

#### 70 *Student Voice*

71 In the history of education, the concept of Student Voice has been linked to different  
72 meanings, given different emphasis by different scholars in different contexts. In 1986,  
73 Giroux and McLaren (1986) used Student Voice to refer to the practices school should

74 employ to promote the values of democratic citizenship and social justice. They argued  
75 that Student Voice ‘refers to the various measures by which students and teachers actively  
76 participate in dialogue. It is related to the discursive means whereby teachers and students  
77 attempt to make themselves “heard” and to define themselves as active authors of their  
78 world (Giroux & McLaren, 1986 p. 235). In recent years, the idea of Student Voice has  
79 mainly been used to refer to rights and empowerment of the voices of students at school  
80 (Fleming, 2013; Messiou, 2006; Mitra, 2004) as well as to school reforms that encourage  
81 students’ participation and involvement in decision making on various school issues  
82 (Quinn & Owen, 2016).

83           In Australia, Quinn and Owen (2016) explored pupil and staff perspectives on a  
84 primary school’s approach to Student Voice and student leadership. Student Voice, in this  
85 study, referred to the informed decisions pupils made about their own learning and about  
86 school issues at an individual level as well as to the decisions they made collectively in  
87 collaboration with adults. After analysing thematically school documents along with  
88 holding staff and pupil interviews, the findings revealed that daily positive teacher-to-  
89 student interactions and regular collaboration between pupils and teachers had positive  
90 outcomes in enhancing the power of Student Voice in the school community. At a  
91 personal level, pupils’ involvement in Student Voice was found to bring benefits,  
92 including the development of collaboration, communication skills and active listening as  
93 well as enhancing their sense of school belonging, so too, their belief that they were  
94 capable of positively contributing to school improvement. A well-structured student voice  
95 mechanism and the provision of a clear agenda was found particularly to facilitate pupils’  
96 participation. A reported downside was that the competitive process of elections resulted  
97 in less popular pupils being unwilling to participate and to put themselves forward as  
98 representatives.

99 Similarly, in the USA context, Mitra (2004) employed a ground theory, in a study  
100 carried out over two years, to investigate secondary-aged pupils' participation in Student  
101 Voice; referring to the reform efforts happening at school in which students and staff were  
102 working together on common goals. Observations, focus groups, and semi-structured  
103 interviews were used for the data collection. The findings revealed that pupils'  
104 involvement enabled them to articulate positive experiences about school and facilitated  
105 their feelings of belonging, competence and their belief that they could exert influence.  
106 However, the degree to which these benefits were accomplished was related to the  
107 effectiveness of Student Voice efforts and the nature of teacher-to-pupil relations. Similar  
108 obstacles to pupil empowerment and participation were noted by Messiou (2006) in a  
109 study involving 227 primary aged pupils in Cyprus. The findings revealed that limited  
110 resources, and teachers' restricted time for collaborating and listening to pupils' views  
111 were two of the reasons reported for the school avoiding seeking their views about school  
112 issues. As stated by Messiou (2006), having the mechanisms to gather information from  
113 pupils is one step towards empowerment, but implementation is the actual evidence that  
114 indicates that schools truly intend to engage with pupils and address their needs. In the  
115 UK, Fleming (2013), after critically reviewing three research and evaluation projects that  
116 involved pupils as researchers, and directly elicited their views on their participation in  
117 school decision making, concluded that they had the skills, capacity and knowledge to  
118 express their views and make constructive suggestions about school change but rarely  
119 was it the case that their suggestions were actually implemented.

120 Despite legislation and initiatives aimed at promoting the right of *all* children and  
121 young people to express their views on all matters affecting their lives, the research  
122 literature indicates that their voices, particularly those with SEND, frequently go unheard.  
123 The study reported here, part of a larger study exploring the well-being and feelings of

124 belonging of secondary-aged pupils (Author, 2017), was aimed at contributing to the field  
125 by reporting the views on their school experiences of young people with SEND.

## 126 **The study**

### 127 *Aims of the study*

128 The study had the purpose of exploring the schooling experiences of secondary-aged  
129 pupils with moderate learning difficulties (MLD) and social, emotional and mental health  
130 difficulties (SEMH) as a way of understanding their needs and facilitating their inclusion.  
131 The focus was on empowering young people with SEND to speak up about their  
132 mainstream education. The specific aims of the study were:

- 133 1. to investigate the mainstream experiences of pupils with MLD and SEMH;
- 134 2. to explore the reasons given for positively or negatively affecting their sense  
135 of school belonging.
- 136 3. to investigate their social relations with their teachers, teaching assistants  
137 (TAs) and peers.

138 The rationale for focussing on the categories of MLD and SEMH was as follows.

- 139 1. *Moderate learning difficulties*: This is the most common type of SEND overall.  
140 According to government statistics, 21.6% of children and young people with  
141 SEND have this primary type of need (DfE, 2018).
- 142 2. *Social, emotional and mental health difficulties*: Within the group of the children  
143 and young people with SEND exclusion rates (permanent and fixed) are highest  
144 for pupils identified as having SEMH difficulties (52.5%) (DfE, 2018), which  
145 suggests possible negative school experiences for these pupils.

146

147 *The context*

148 The research was conducted in a suburban metropolitan area in England. Three  
149 mainstream state-funded secondary schools took part, with all being judged ‘Good’ by  
150 the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted)<sup>1</sup>. All schools had a Student Voice program  
151 in place.

152 *Sampling procedure*

153 All students from Years 7 to 10 in each school (approximately 500 students per school)  
154 were invited to take part in the main study, which required completion of a 56-item  
155 questionnaire consisting of three subscales: sense of school belonging (SOSB), perceived  
156 inclusive ethos (IE), and social relations (SR). Prior to data collection, a pilot study was  
157 conducted to test the clarity of items and their internal consistency. Cronbach’s alphas  
158 were satisfactory for all scales with an average at .78. A total of 1,440 pupils (97%)  
159 completed the questionnaire. Following completion pupils were asked to indicate whether  
160 they wished to participate in semi-structured interviews and 48% of all respondents  
161 indicated they were willing to take part. The participants were also asked to complete the  
162 pupil self-report version of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)  
163 (Goodman, 1997). The SDQ is a brief measure to screen for behavioural and emotional  
164 difficulties in young people aged around 11-16 years. According to SDQ terminology,  
165 young people with high scores in SDQ total difficulties are classified as ‘abnormal’,  
166 followed by ‘borderline’ to ‘normal’. The SDQ, in addition to the professional advice  
167 sought from the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO), was used to triangulate  
168 pupils’ identification. In particular, after the completion of the SDQ, the SENCO of each

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<sup>1</sup> There is a 4-point grating scale for Ofsted inspection judgements: i) outstanding, ii) good, iii) requires improvement, and iv) inadequate. A school judged as good at their most recent inspection, they will have a short inspection approximately every 3 years (Ofsted, 2014).

169 school was asked to identify pupils with MLD and SEMH based on school's SEND  
170 register. Of the pupils identified with MLD and SEMH, those who had indicated they  
171 would be willing to participate in semi-structured interviews, were invited.

172 A purposive sample of 37 pupils was selected to participate, based on SEND status  
173 (MLD or SEMH), and/or classification on the SDQ and scores on the SOSB subscale.  
174 This yielded a total of 17 MLD, 13 SEMH and 7 'abnormal' pupils. Of these, 8 MLD, 4  
175 SEMH and 3 'abnormal' pupils scored in the upper quartile of the SOSB subscale  
176 ( $\geq 36\%$ ), indicating a high sense of school belonging and 9 MLD, 9 SEMH and 4  
177 'abnormal' pupils scored in the lower quartile ( $\geq 29\%$ ), which suggested a low sense of  
178 school belonging. Of the 13 pupils identified as SEMH, according to school SEND  
179 registers, five were classified as 'normal' by the SDQ terminology and eight were  
180 classified as 'abnormal'. Eight typical pupils also participated in the interviews; their  
181 views are reported here as a comparable group. Of these eight typical pupils, four scored  
182 in the upper quartile of the SOSB subscale ( $\geq 36\%$ ) and four in the lower quartile  
183 ( $\geq 29\%$ ).

#### 184 *Data collection method*

185 An interview schedule was designed comprising 36 open-ended questions, with  
186 supplementary questions to explore responses further. These quizzed the pupils' sense of  
187 school belonging and attitude towards school (e.g. *'How do you feel about being in this*  
188 *school?'*); their perceived school ethos: behaviour management (e.g. *'What is your view*  
189 *on the way teachers apply behaviour management strategies at school?'*); inclusion (e.g.  
190 *'What is your view about Student Voice?'*); as well as their social relations with teachers,  
191 TAs and peers (e.g. *'With whom do you feel close at school?'*).

192 Three pupils (i.e. classified as SEMH, MLD, typical) who had already completed  
193 the main questionnaire were invited to take part in a pilot study to test interview procedure



194 and refine the interview schedule. The pilot study followed the five stages recommended  
195 by Breakwell, Hammond, Fife-Schaw and Smith (2006) to enhance the reliability of the  
196 interviews, namely: a) assess whether the explanation of the interview is understood by  
197 all participants, b) check the degree to which specific questions can be easily perceived  
198 by them, c) make the necessary amendments that arise from the pilot feedback, d) test  
199 whether the participants engage easily with the interview process, and e) evaluate whether  
200 the responding answers are the desired ones. Piloting indicated the need for some  
201 rewording of questions to ensure they were understood by all pupils, e.g. ‘... *behaviour*  
202 *that will result in a sanction*’ was replaced with ‘...*behaviour that will get me in trouble.*’

### 203 ***Procedure***

204 All thirty-four interviews were conducted face-to-face by the first author. Pupils were  
205 offered the option to be interviewed individually or in groups of two or three. Justification  
206 for variation in conducting interviews has been provided by Kitzinger (1995, p.299 in  
207 Robson, 2011), who stated that group interviews ‘do not discriminate against people who  
208 cannot read or write and they can encourage participation from people reluctant to be  
209 interviewed on their own or who feel they have nothing to say.’ It was noted that pupils  
210 identified as MLD, in particular, showed a preference for group interviews.

211 Prior to the interview process, the participants were provided with an explanation  
212 of the aims of the study. The importance of their contribution was also emphasised. Their  
213 permission for the interviews to be audio taped was sought; one pupil (SEMH) did not  
214 give permission and withdrew. The interviews lasted between 15 and 25 minutes. An ‘ice-  
215 breaker’ activity preceded the interviews in an attempt to create a relaxed and friendly  
216 atmosphere.

217 *Ethical issues*

218 Ethical approval for the study was granted by the research ethics committee of a Higher  
219 Education (HE) institution in England. Written consent was sought from all pupil  
220 participants and their parents. Pupils were informed of their rights to confidentiality,  
221 anonymity and withdrawal from the study in line with the guidelines of the British  
222 Psychological Society (BPS) *Code of Human Research Ethics* (2014). The data were  
223 stored and processed in compliance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

224 *Data Analysis*

225 The interviews were transcribed verbatim and **thematically coded** via the employment of  
226 the qualitative data analysis program QSR NVivo 10. Thematic analysis was performed  
227 through the process of coding in six phases, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006),  
228 followed by an inductive and deductive circle of coding, as explained by Saldaña (2013).  
229 **The rationale for selecting thematic analysis was to produce a surface-level analysis**  
230 **(Braun & Clarke, 2006), where emphasis would be given to the voices of pupils with**  
231 **SEND, rather than on the first author's personal interpretation of their perceptions. In**  
232 **addition, the use of thematic analysis enabled the first author to use theory as a sense of**  
233 **direction to explore themes across the dataset.**

234 During the inductive coding, the first author familiarised herself with the data by  
235 listening to the voices of pupils and any theme that occurred or assumption made was  
236 thus data-driven. The deductive analysis was structured around how the questionnaire and  
237 interview data addressed school ethos, sense of school belonging and social relations, as  
238 defined by the extant literature in the field. **This means that prior to the preliminary**  
239 **analysis of data, the first author had already developed a framework of themes based on**  
240 **theory draw form literature which then use to organise, and group emerged themes from**  
241 **raw data accordingly.**

242           The first grouping, school ethos, encompassed two sub-themes: behaviour  
243 management strategies and inclusivity. The second grouping, sense of school belonging,  
244 also comprised two sub-themes: reasons for liking and reasons for not liking school.  
245 Finally, the third grouping, social relations, comprised three sub-themes: pupil-to-teacher  
246 relation, pupil-to-TA relation, and pupil-to-pupil relation. Following identification of the  
247 seven sub-themes of responses, the data were examined to identify themes within the  
248 categories. Finally, patterns were looked for among the themes.

## 249 **Findings**

250 The results presented here emerged from responses to open-ended questions enquiring  
251 into the schooling experiences of pupils with SEND. The views of typical pupils are also  
252 displayed as a comparable group. In this section, only a sample of the elicited views are  
253 presented as being illustrative of all pupil-participant responses. These responses are  
254 reported under the themes and sub-themes that emerged.

### 255 **Pupils' perceptions of their school ethos**

256 ***Behaviour management:*** The pupils who had the least positive perspectives on the  
257 behaviour management strategies employed by their school were those with SEMH. The  
258 majority of them expressed the view that teachers usually paid attention to challenging  
259 behaviour, while they tended to ignore good behaviour and hard work.

260           *'I'm not a bad pupil, but I do speak in class—it annoys me because I've seen*  
261 *people working hard, but all the teachers' attention goes towards the bad*  
262 *pupils [...]. It frustrates me because the good pupils aren't doing anything, but*  
263 *all their attention is not focused on the goodness of what they're doing, but on*  
264 *what the bad pupils are doing.'*

265 All pupils with SEMH reported their dissatisfaction with the behaviour  
266 management strategies and commented that those used neither taught them what  
267 appropriate behaviour is, nor helped them improve their behaviour. However, as one pupil  
268 explained, challenging behaviour was a way to escape lessons, as this meant being sent  
269 out of class.

270 *'I think that the teachers do need to be a bit more strict, because pupils can*  
271 *get quite rude to them and they kind of just let it go, so it doesn't really teach*  
272 *them anything about what they're doing is wrong. But, it's normally just they*  
273 *get sent out and they come back in. It's not really learning nothing and I think*  
274 *pupil, try to be rude just to get out of class, so they don't have to do the work,*  
275 *but I think many teachers could be a bit more strict and actually punish them*  
276 *instead of just sending them out.'*

277 The majority of pupils with SEMH also accused teachers of labelling and enacting  
278 discrimination against them. The statements of some pupils with SEMH revealed that the  
279 reasons for being unfairly treated were related to their 'bad' reputation and the label  
280 teachers attached to them.

281 *'It is like teachers remember when you've been rude to them, so they're always*  
282 *going to carry the stigma of "That's the rude child, and he's going to do that*  
283 *again, so now I have to be even more harsh on him."'*

284 *'If you had a bad reputation in your old school, because they have the form,*  
285 *they'll pass it on to your next school and then you have that reputation [...]*  
286 *basically you become a label in their eyes. And because probably, I don't know,*  
287 *every teacher gets that, so if you do something, they'll think is you or if you do*  
288 *something, they'll take it in a more serious punishment.'*

289 The issue of differential treatment towards pupils with challenging behaviour was  
290 also raised by interviewees identified with MLD. The majority of these pupils reported  
291 their empathy for their peers with challenging behaviour, and denounced teachers for  
292 excluding them from school.

293 *'Sometimes they can be a bit unfair when they exclude them from the school,*  
294 *but I get sending them to a different class or sending them out of the classroom,*  
295 *I feel that's a good thing.'*

296 What is more, a majority of pupils with MLD also expressed their dissatisfaction  
297 with the behaviour management and the ineffective way teachers managing  
298 misbehaviour. They not only got distracted by pupils with challenging behaviour in class,  
299 which negatively affected their learning, but they also received limited support, as the  
300 attention of teachers was mainly being given to control those disturbing the lessons.

301 *'The teachers are always tending to the bad people, so you don't get really to*  
302 *learn as much because ..., it sort of shortens the time for the people that want*  
303 *to learn and get on with their work.'*

304 Nevertheless, only a minority of typical pupils considered teachers were  
305 inconsistent in their administration of sanctions imposed on pupils with challenging  
306 behaviour, whilst the majority of them complained about the special treatment this group  
307 of pupils received.

308 *'Because you could be in class and get detention for talking, and the next day*  
309 *one person is talking, and they don't get detention for it.'*

310 *'They usually pay more attention to the people who are usually bad, and if they*  
311 *do one thing good, they will give them a merit, but people who are usually*  
312 *always good don't get the merits.'*

313 Typical pupils were also the only group who praised the behaviour management  
314 strategies. A widespread view expressed by them was that their counterparts with  
315 challenging behaviour deserved to be punished, as they were not following the rules and  
316 were disturbing others, thus preventing them from learning.

317 *'They actually manage it really good, because they do these levels [traffic lights*  
318 *behaviour management system]. So, then you know you are actually doing*

319 *something wrong and so you change your behaviour. When they're bad, they*  
320 *send them outside. Yeah, that's what they do, and you carry on learning.'*

321 **Inclusivity:** When pupils with SEMH were asked to comment on the support they  
322 received, only a minority of them expressed their satisfaction with that they received from  
323 teachers, while sometimes contradictory views were expressed about the support received  
324 from TAs.

325 *'[At school] They give us as much attention as possible. So, sometimes they*  
326 *bring TAs and assistants to help us, especially when we're in the lower set, then*  
327 *specially we have that good attention, because there's less of us in a group so*  
328 *we get more attention than if we had 40 people in the classroom.'*

329 *'They can sometimes be a bit annoying, because when you don't need help, they*  
330 *come over...They don't know what you're doing or what the teacher is*  
331 *teaching, so it's kind of like you're teaching them.'*

332 Perceptions of pupils with MLD revealed that the allocation of support provided by  
333 teachers was considered not to be equally distributed in class. A minority of pupils  
334 expressed the opinion that teachers mainly supported high-achievers.

335 *'I think they put more effort in the pupils that are already smart.'*

336 Others, however, held the view that most of teacher attention was paid to pupils with  
337 challenging behaviour and those who struggled with their learning.

338 A majority of typical pupils also voiced the opinion that teachers allocated their  
339 attention unfairly among different groups within class, with attention being given  
340 primarily to high-achievers and/or pupils with SEND, while the group of quiet typical  
341 pupils with average attainment, was perceived as being overlooked.

342 *'If you're really bad in the lesson, then the teacher will give you more attention.*  
343 *If you're one of the people that are really good, and you talk a lot, and you're*  
344 *also really good at work, then you also get attention. But if you're in the middle,*

345 *like you don't put your hand up that much, and maybe you're not the best at*  
346 *the subject, you don't really get that much attention.'*

347 *Group work:* This emerged as another sub-theme of inclusivity. Responses from  
348 the majority of pupils with SEMH revealed two obstacles that they considered hindered  
349 their successful participation in group work. The first pertained to their difficulty in  
350 socialising with other peers and the second, related to their finding it hard to control their  
351 behaviour.

352 *'It can be a bit of a disaster, because I have trouble understanding, I have*  
353 *trouble socially sometimes. I think sometimes we, as pupils, can abuse that [...]*  
354 *we're just going to go with our friends and we're not going to do any work.'*

355

356 **Conversely**, for the majority of pupils with MLD, group work was seen as an opportunity  
357 to socialise and interact with other peers.

358 *'They're doing it like every day now. They encourage other people to work*  
359 *together so we get to know each other much more.'*

360 A majority of typical pupils also praised the positive effects of group work, by  
361 emphasising the way in which it benefitted their learning.

362 *'I prefer it because you get to –you're not just sitting on your own. You get to*  
363 *hear other people's opinions on whatever you're doing. It kind of gives you*  
364 *more ideas, in a way – say if you're doing an essay, it gives you more ideas of*  
365 *your own and gives them ideas. It kind of like helps each other out.'*

366 However, according to some typical pupils, if group work was to be successful two  
367 requirements were essential: the necessity for all pupils to behave properly and being  
368 allocated to a 'good' group, i.e. one consisting of pupils with high attainment.

369 *Student Voice:* This is another sub-theme of inclusivity. The findings from the  
370 study shed light on the reasons why pupils with SEND and typical pupils choose to  
371 abstain from participating in Student Voice. Responses from the majority of pupils with

372 SEMH revealed that they considered their involvement in decision making was very  
373 limited and that most decisions were made by those in authority, i.e. teachers. Pupils with  
374 SEMH also felt excluded from the opportunity of being voted for as pupil representative.  
375 The main reasons that appeared to be holding them back them back, were their lack of  
376 confidence and their perceptions of the unfair process of election, in so far as they  
377 believed that the most ‘popular’ pupils would be those who other peers would vote for.

378 *‘Say it was three people, and one had a few mates and the other one was really*  
379 *popular and the other one had no friends, the really popular one, I think, would*  
380 *get it, because they’ve got more friends.’*

381 **Conversely**, a majority of pupils with MLD seemed to lack awareness of what Student  
382 Voice was, whilst regarding those few who were aware, they were unwilling to take part  
383 due to lack of interest or most importantly, lack of confidence. Disappointment regarding  
384 the few changes that took place was another reason that led to their decision to abstain  
385 from being pupil representatives.

386 *‘I don’t find it’s important to me. It sort of doesn’t interest me at all [...] I come*  
387 *to school to learn, I don’t really care about what else is going on, just to learn.’*

388 *‘I have to speak in front of the whole school and I just don’t like that.’*

389 *‘Nothing really happens.’*

390 A majority of typical pupils also expressed their disappointment with Student Voice. For  
391 them, the main reasons identified for being unwilling to take part were the lack of  
392 implementation of suggested changes and fear of being intimidated for perceived  
393 ‘obsequious’ behaviour towards school staff.

394 *‘If you are a representative, you’re a bit of looser...it’s seen as a teacher’s pet*  
395 *thing.’*



396 ***Pupils' perceptions of the reasons influencing their sense of school belonging***

397 When pupils were asked to report the factors affecting their sense of school belonging,  
398 two sub-themes emerged: reasons for liking and reasons for not liking school. One of the  
399 most frequently cited reasons expressed by a majority of pupils with SEMH for not liking  
400 school were with regards to the ineffective structures applied in relation to start and end  
401 of the day, the duration of the lessons as well as their lack of commitment to do their work  
402 especially when they are were in a bad mood. These views are illustrated in the following  
403 statements:

404 *'So, I don't mind school, but you know, sometimes, to wake up in the mornings*  
405 *to do homework, it can be a bit tiring, so I get stressed, but I don't hate school.'*

406 *'If I have double lessons I don't really enjoy, then I don't really feel like coming*  
407 *to school because it's boring.'*

408 *'it's just that I don't really want to do the work. Sometimes just tired, sometimes*  
409 *you're moody, you get really annoyed, and you just want to sit there and be*  
410 *quiet, then the teacher picks on you and all of that...'*

411 A majority of typical pupils also cited 'boring' lessons as one of the main reasons for not  
412 liking school. Specifically, they linked these with didactic teaching strategies, whilst 'fun'  
413 lessons were associated with interactive teaching approaches:

414 *'A bad lesson is when we're doing boring work all the time and we don't have*  
415 *time to communicate or do fun activities, because I, in my opinion like doing*  
416 *group work or making presentations making the lesson fun.'*

417 Despite the different views expressed, common to all pupils, irrespective of their type of  
418 need, a reason given for liking school was interesting lessons, where interactive teaching  
419 strategies were used as well as their understanding of the importance of education in their  
420 life. Illustrations of these perspectives are given below:

421 *'I like when I have a fun day. When I have enjoyable lessons that I don't get*  
422 *bored in.'*

423 *I think it is very important, because you're going to need the education, if*  
424 *you're going to get somewhere in life. But I'm not going to lie, I actually do*  
425 *find school a little bit difficult. I get distracted very, very easily and sometimes,*  
426 *well most times, I walk into the classroom late, because I don't want to be*  
427 *there.'*

#### 428 ***Pupils' perceptions of their social relations***

429 ***Relations with teachers:*** Whilst the majority of pupils with SEMH reported mainly  
430 negative relations with their teachers, some held positive views. When these pupils  
431 reported positive relations, they described teachers who were 'fun', who taught in a way  
432 that facilitated their learning and who had the skills to manage their challenging behaviour  
433 in a respectful way.

434 *'He is a good teacher and he teaches you just right. You have fun and games*  
435 *sometimes, but sometimes he tells you when to stop. You know when to stop.'*

436 Conversely, negative views were expressed about those teachers who lacked empathy and  
437 understanding and who mainly focused on academic attainment.

438 *'I don't like coming to school because [...] there's some of those teachers that*  
439 *you don't like, and if I'm in a bad mood, like angry or upset or something like*  
440 *that, I don't like coming to school, because then it's just going to be work, work,*  
441 *work, and no one is going to ask you, "Are you okay?" or anything, because*  
442 *they say that school is coming for learning. So, this frustration that you get,*  
443 *you have to leave it outside the classroom.'*

444 A minority of pupils with SEMH also criticised the teaching methods applied by some  
445 teachers, who they felt ignored their individual needs, failed to provide them with second  
446 chances and did not give them enough time to complete the work or process information.  
447 Finally, negative views were expressed about those teachers who were unable to manage  
448 a class, or who were perceived as employing an authoritarian approach in order to gain  
449 control.

450 For the majority of pupils with MLD their relations with teachers appeared to be  
451 generally positive. Good teachers were described as those who supported them in the  
452 lessons, were approachable to talk to and who respected their privacy. They also praised  
453 those who they considered to be ‘fun’ and who employed interactive approaches to  
454 teaching and learning.

455 *‘They make it easy for you to learn by having some bits of fun, in it.’*

456 However, a minority of pupils with MLD expressed dislike of teachers, who they  
457 considered behaved inconsistently and in a way that appeared to disregard their feelings.  
458 As one pupil with MLD expressed it:

459 *‘They start shouting for no reason.’*

460 A majority of typical pupils also reported positive relations with their teachers.  
461 They expressed a preference for those who were friendly, willing to discuss things, taught  
462 through interactive lessons, and were able to control the class without being heavy  
463 handed.

464 *‘She was really nice, because she wasn’t so relaxed with us that we could all  
465 go over her, but she wasn’t really strict.’*

466 A minority of typical pupils who expressed negative perspectives, reported dislike of  
467 those teachers who they considered were hostile, and unfriendly. For example:

468 *‘[There are these teachers that] you look down whenever you see them, because  
469 they’re sort of scary. They just get so frustrated and start to argue all the time.’*

470 **Relations with TAs:** With reference to their perceived relations with their TAs,  
471 pupils with SEMH were those who expressed the most contrasting views. Some expressed  
472 positive feelings about the support they received with their work, the support TAs gave  
473 in helping them to regain control of their behaviour, and about the psychological support

474 they provided. However, others expressed their resentment at not getting sufficient  
475 support and some complained about the quality of that which they received.

476 By way of some contrast, a majority of pupils with MLD reported generally  
477 positive relations with their TAs. They unanimously expressed their gratitude towards  
478 them for the educational support they provided, the encouragement to improve their  
479 behaviour, and their compassion when they had problems.

480

481 *'When I am stuck at work, the assistant helps me...do the work and then so, I*  
482 *don't get detention.'*

483 **Relations with peers:** A majority of pupils with SEMH reported overall negative  
484 perceptions about their relations with peers, with some reporting bullying and difficulties  
485 in forming relationships. Conversely, there was a minority of SEMH pupils, who  
486 expressed positive views about their relations with other peers at school.

487

488 *'Whenever you say something, someone always has to disagree. There are quite*  
489 *a lot of insults and people think that they're better than you, so it makes you*  
490 *feel quite nervous and upset.'*

491 *'So, yeah [it is easy for me to make friends], but it depends what cliques you*  
492 *have, because there's obviously cliques in school and it's easier, because I'm*  
493 *with the popular group, so we're all together in a big group. But I'd say, if you*  
494 *were a new person, then it would be harder for you to make friends.'*

495 Contrasting views about their peer relations were also expressed among pupils with MLD.

496 A minority of them reported generally close friendships at school and developing new  
497 friendships was considered to be easy for some.

498 *'You start speaking to them and they start speaking back, and you're friends.'*

499 However, there was a minority of pupils with MLD, who reported being severely bullied  
500 due to their learning difficulties.

501 *'People swear at me possibly because I'm different...when I come to class, and*  
502 *I start reading, people start passing me, because I can't do the reading, then I*  
503 *got bullied.'*

504 In contrast, a majority of typical pupils reported generally positive views about their  
505 relations with peers. All said they had trustworthy friends at school and claimed that  
506 making new friendships was easy.

## 507 **Discussion**

508 This study elicited the voices of secondary-aged pupils with SEND to understand their  
509 gained school experiences in mainstream English settings. Insights of pupils with SEMH  
510 and MLD revealed differences in their expressed school experiences, mainly depending  
511 on their type of need. **As this study has indicated, pupils with SEMH were the ones who**  
512 **expressed the greatest dissatisfaction with school when compared to pupils with MLD**  
513 **and their typical counterparts. It can thus be speculated that the needs of pupils with**  
514 **SEMH are less satisfied within mainstream settings as compared to the needs of pupils**  
515 **with MLD (Author, 2018; Murray & Greenberg, 2001).** Yet, despite their expressed  
516 differences, all pupils, irrespective of their type of need, voiced quite similar views on  
517 what makes a positive school experience for them. They all underlined the importance of  
518 receiving interesting and engaging lessons in making their school experience more  
519 worthwhile, thus increasing their desire to come to school. This finding is consistent with  
520 the research outcomes of a study conducted by Ireson and Hallam (2005), who found an  
521 association between pupils' perceived satisfaction with teaching and school liking.

522 What is more, all the pupils revealed that if their school experience was to  
523 improve, there was the need for the implementation of more effective behaviour

524 management strategies to teach appropriate behaviour, control misbehaviour and confine  
525 disruptiveness. This is consistent with Hatton's findings (2013) who stressed the  
526 implementation of effective behaviour management policies as a key element to engender  
527 inclusive schools, where everyone is included. All pupils, irrespective of their difficulties,  
528 expressed their desire to have teachers who allocated attention and support fairly among  
529 pupils in class. This was particularly so for those quiet typical pupils with average  
530 attainment, who felt that they were often overlooked. Finally, all pupils expressed the  
531 need to have positive social relations in their school life. Hence, that also included pupils  
532 with challenging behaviour, who felt particularly dissatisfied with their relations with  
533 teachers, TAs and peers. For example, pupils with SEMH along with their counterparts  
534 expressed respect for those teachers who were funny, knew how to control a class and  
535 taught in an interesting way.

536 To summarise, the findings of this study indicate that pupils with SEND have  
537 perceptive ideas about what makes a positive school experience for them and if schools  
538 and teachers acted upon more on their suggestions, enhancement of inclusive practice  
539 would be possible. However, one of the main issues underlined in this study is that the  
540 **voices of pupils with SEND** often goes unheard, mainly **due to ineffective mechanisms**  
541 **that are in place e.g. 'I have to speak in front of the whole school and I just don't like**  
542 **that'**. This prevents pupils who lack confidence from expressing their views and when  
543 some others do, there is little action taken on their proposed ideas e.g. **'nothing really**  
544 **happens'**. Similar findings had been elicited for other studies in the field (Fleming, 2013;  
545 Messiou, 2006; Quinn & Owen, 2016). It can thus be concluded that there is an urgent  
546 need for schools to redesign the applied mechanisms currently used to elicit pupils'  
547 voices. That means, replace exclusionary approaches, such as selection of student  
548 representatives based on popularity voting (i.e. voting based on popularity) with more

549 inclusive ones where all pupils, even those who lack confidence, would feel equally  
550 motivated and encouraged to express their views and take part in school's decision  
551 making. There is also the need to train teachers to listen to pupils' views and to put their  
552 reasonable suggestions into practice, if Student Voice is to encourage the involvement of  
553 all pupils in school decision making. **Finally, there are two main limitations of this study.**  
554 **The first limitation is the small sample of participants, which limits generalisability of the**  
555 **study's findings. The second limitation is the validity of the sample as the identification**  
556 **of pupils relied on school recorded categories which renders a pupil's behaviour and**  
557 **attainment open to subjective interpretations.**

## 558 **Conclusion**

559 In this paper, it has been shown that pupils with SEND are capable of articulating  
560 their views on what makes a positive school experience for them. Moreover, it has also  
561 emerged that independently of their different needs, all pupils expressed almost similar  
562 opinions on what they enjoyed about school and which changes would help make their  
563 experiences more worthwhile. Obviously, more research is needed in investigating the  
564 school experiences of different groups of SEND, particularly of those with more complex  
565 needs attending mainstream English settings. Further research is also needed in  
566 identifying the mechanism that would enable all pupils to voice their views and actively  
567 encourage their participation in school decision making.

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