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Methodological issues in collecting children's view part 2: using nominal group technique to explore children's views of the difficulties encountered in school

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Abstract

This paper examines the processes involved in using Nominal Group Technique, to collect the views of boys with and without disability, on their experiences in school. This methodology has the potential to provide individual as well as group data but little attention has been paid to the validity and reliability of the technique. Data are explored to examine how pupil views are transformed from the individual to the collective. Contrasts are drawn with questionnaire data to consider the ways in which the format and organization of the activity impact on the responses and responsiveness of the pupils.

Keywords: Nominal Group Technique; Children's Views, Disability

1. Introduction

Recent legislation in the UK has placed a duty on schools to adopt practices that enable children's views to contribute to creating responsive learning environments. More-over schools have a responsibility to make reasonable adjustments to their policies, practices and procedures to ensure disabled children are not disadvantaged. Schools therefore have to find methods that enable *all* children to contribute their views, ones which produce valid information which are relatively easy to collect and analyse.

Guidance on approaches to "interviewing" children with a disability comes from a number of different investigative and evidential sources drawing a range of both familiar and novel methods that include the use of different stimulus material (e.g. video, photographs, stories, letters) and activities (e.g. mind mapping, drawing, keeping a diary) as well as more traditional approaches such as focus groups, questionnaires and individual conversations (Bragg 2007). Not all methods are accessible for all pupils and elsewhere I explore the cognitive and linguistic demands of this process for children with the most challenging needs where an individualised approach, supported by concrete materials that are personal to the child may be more appropriate (Porter 2009). Here the focus is on methods used by teachers in mainstream schools. Previous research indicated that given a choice schools preferred to use structured methods to find out about children's experiences of difficulties rather than more innovative open ended methods (Porter et al 2008; Porter & Daniels 2010) the focus of this paper is a structured group approach to eliciting the views of children. Groups have a number of advantages: they provide a more secure and supportive environment (Osbourne and Collins 2001) when compared with an individual interview where the child may feel under pressure to respond in the way that the adult expects; the presence of friends can provide confidence; they can be more fun; and children help to prod each other's memory (Punch 2002). There is also evidence to suggest that mainstream children may prefer to be in groups especially when talking about problems (Punch 2002). Group settings also shift

the power towards the participants to raise issues and have the potential to generate more ideas. They provide the relative safety for the novice teacher-researcher of making it more likely that some views will be offered. Finally group approaches may also be viewed as more time efficient when placed in the context of mainstream schooling.

Traditional focus groups however can be difficult to manage to ensure that discussion is not dominated by a few individuals and that each pupil makes a contribution. For the lone researcher it can be challenging to record the data in a way that enables individual's contributions to be clearly tracked. There is also some uncertainty about the type of data analysis that should be carried out. Often sound bites of qualitative data are reported and the issue of consensus or the extent to which particular views are shared can be difficult to demonstrate through the data analysis (Parker & Tritter 2006; Farnsworth & Boon 2010; Massey 2011).

For these reasons, there can be a number of advantages to using a more structured approach such as that of Nominal Group Technique (NGT). This method was developed in the 1970's by Van de Ven & Delbecq (1972) in the context of program planning as a way of trying to avoid people being overly influenced by the interviewer and tailoring their responses accordingly. It has also been seen as a way of removing some of the barriers in the language used by interviewers. The technique is one that's well suited to situations where these aspects may be particularly problematic as in the case of teachers interviewing young people in school. The NGT method usually includes an initial period where individuals have time to think about their own ideas and typically represent them in an aide memoire prior to being invited in turn to select and share an idea with the group, giving each person an equal opportunity to speak without fear that their responses will not be listened to (MacPhail 2001). Ideas are then clarified further through discussion prior to members voting to determine consensus. The researcher typically acts as an impartial leader, keeping a list of the contributions and tallying the votes.

While the method has been used across a number of settings there is limited data on the actual process. Along with traditional focus groups there is limited data on the ways in which the group data is constructed from individual views and consequently the extent to which group data is a valid representation of its members (Massey 2011). This is particularly pertinent where experiences of pupils may differ and where the perspective of the (disabled) individual is as important as the group. The research reported here strives to answer the following questions:

1. How are views maintained, modified, prioritised or rejected during the use of NGT ?
2. Do some pupil's views hold more sway than others?
3. Are commonly held views prioritised?
4. What are the implications of the findings for the use of group versus individual methods of data collection?

2. Method

The participants were two groups of six volunteer pupils from year 9 (age 13-14) of a boys secondary school. One of the groups comprised children with special educational needs and those who were disabled. Each group of pupils were asked by their teacher to think about the school day and identify "what makes things difficult in school" and given 5 minutes to record their own ten personal difficulties. They were then asked for one of their ideas in turn and the teacher wrote them on the board. When the pupils had no more ideas that they wanted to contribute and each idea had been clarified, they were asked to vote for their top ten difficulties. In the first group this was followed by a second round of voting, giving each child two further votes to assign between those items already seen as priorities. In the second group pupils were asked at the end of the session to indicate on their own lists which were the top three difficulties. Both groups then worked in pairs to consider how they might overcome one of these difficulties. The researcher observed the sessions and collected both individual and group data.

3. Results and Discussion

The first group wrote between six and ten items each and from this combined total of 45 offered 15 items to the teacher. Table 1 below provides a list of the items that in the order in which they were offered i.e. the first pupil offered “over-packed bags” as a particular difficulty he experienced. Later his second offering, item 7, when the teacher had been round each of the pupils and returned to him was “tired”. Looking down the second column it is clear that no child in the first round offered the first item that they had written on their own individual list. Having been round the group twice the teacher asked for any additional items for the list and pupil 6 contributed a further two, which had in fact been the first two items on his list, and pupil 5 offered his ninth item. Pupil 2’s second offering was written in different ways three times on his list. Pupil 4 offered an item that was not on his list.

Table 1: Items offered by Group 1 and the outcome of voting

<i>Pupil</i>	<i>Items as offered in order</i>	<i>Item order on list of child offering the item</i>	<i>First voting round- maximum per item =6</i>	<i>Second voting round – selection limited to items that scored 6 on the previous round</i>
1	Over-packed bag	3	1	
2	Not enough water (drinking fountains)	8	3	
3	One-sided teachers	4	6	4
4	Standing up on the bus for half an hour	2	1	
5	When the bell doesn’t go on time	2	6	
6	Exams- too much stuff in them	5	6	3
1	Tired	1	6	2
2	Lunch-time run out of food	3/4/6	3	
3	Distractions- something going on in school, out of the window	6	4	
4	Just before exams teachers go over and over everything every day	Not on list	2	
5	Lots of homework on the same day	4	6	1
6	Uniform- spend time checking it	4	4	
6	Not liking a subject	2	6	
6	Subject u like but don’t like the teacher	1	5	
2	Teachers don’t listen to you	9	6	2

The first round of voting produced seven priorities and this was subsequently refined to produce five: in order these were: one-sided teachers, exams (with too much stuff in them); being tired, lots of homework on the same day and teachers who don’t listen to you. The order of the item in the child’s list did not appear to be a good prediction of whether it would be seen as a priority by others.

The second group’s items are listed in table 2.

Table 2: Items offered by Group 2 and the outcome of voting

	<i>Item as offered</i>	<i>Item order on list of child that offers the item</i>	<i>First voting round- maximum votes per item =6</i>
A	Exams- pressure to do well	14	5
B	Being tired at school	1	3
C	Forgetting books and appointments	5	3
D	Not having work set at the correct level	7	6
E	People disrupting	1	4
F	Being hungry or thirsty at school	4	3
A	Dealing with teachers you don’t get on with	1	4
B	Being uninterested in topic or lesson	9	3

C	Poor facilities	4	2
D	Having teachers who don't properly explain what they want you to do	10	2
E	Water fountains being at opposite ends of the school	Not on list	3
F	Groups punished rather than individuals	7	5
E	Others leaving litter in the yard and we get punished	3	1
F	Missing out on exams due to other activities	8	6
D	Being late for school and lessons	4 & 5	2

Observations of the second group suggested that they approached the task more confidently. They clarified the task, they wrote more individual items and they were more likely to offer to the group, the first item they had thought of. Repeatedly however they offered later items in their list and included one that they had not thought of before. The first round of voting brought fewer items on which there was total consensus with pupils agreeing that “not having work set at the correct level” and “missing out on exams due to other activities” were shared difficulties. And five out of the six pupils agreed that “pressure to do well in exams” and “punishment of the group rather than the individual” also presented difficulties. Again the most voted for areas of difficulty appeared often to be later thoughts of respondents, however looking at the full lists of all the boys a number of top items appeared to feature. For example each of the pupils expressed concern about having work set at the appropriate level in their individual lists, writing “being in a class where the abilities are too mixed”, “work at your capability”, “being in the wrong set”, “not learning new skills”, “doing things in lessons that you think are useless”. Likewise it is unsurprising that exams feature in the top six items as they appear in the written lists of four pupils. However there are some surprises, “missing out on exams due to other activities” was voted for by all 6 pupils, yet only features in two other lists. Equally there are some items that appear to be pupils’ individual concerns that are not offered. For example pupil B identified “Being ill for a long time and not knowing what is going on and having to catch up” as one of his top three difficulties.

4. Conclusion

In answer to the question: “How are views maintained, modified, prioritised or rejected, it is apparent that pupils don't offer the first thing they thought of nor for many pupils is this an item of particular importance. However the requirement to think about the issue and produce ten items encourages pupils to engage with the task and think more carefully about issues that they find difficult or challenging. The group process does appear to support pupils in thinking about challenges and the production of new items, those which have not appeared on an individual child's list provides some evidence of this. However some items that are important to the pupil are not offered in the group setting- perhaps because they are too personal to the child or because it is recognized that others don't share their difficulty.

In answer to the question, “do some pupil's views hold more sway”? Some individuals did offer more items (e.g. pupil 6 in the first group) but many of the top items appeared in the individual lists of the majority of the group. Equally if we consider the relationship to whether commonly held views are prioritised, the second round of voting appears to offer a way of distinguishing between items to identify an order of importance for the group. Equally the second method of “silent” voting used with Group 2 enables the teacher to identify individual priorities as well as group ones.

These results have interesting implications when we compare this method to that of questionnaires where pupil responses may be brief and relatively short and questions that require a qualitative response are more likely to be skipped entirely (Porter 2011). Questionnaires do however provide the potential for an anonymous response and the opportunity to write about issues that are personal to the individual pupil. This may be a forum in which a pupil first discloses a difficulty- and contrasts to a group setting where personal matters are not put forward. However the issue needs to be in the forefront of the pupils mind to be offered in this context. Arguably these methods need to be seen

as a first step in establishing a new dialogue with pupils who are experiencing difficulties in school. They will only succeed where pupils feel their views are valued and taken seriously. Children need to feel that staff genuinely want to hear their views and to act on them, that it's not a "window-dressing" exercise (Stafford et al 2003). Schools need to create spaces for listening to pupils and nominal group technique provides one fora for all pupils to contribute to making school a better place for learning.

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