Methodological issues in accessing children’s views: using interviews and questionnaires

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Abstract

Working out what to do to promote equality of opportunity is not always straightforward. The concept of ‘equal treatment’ of children in schools brings with it tensions and dilemmas (Norwich, 2008); sometimes it means treating all pupils the same and sometimes it means treating pupils differently. We have carried out two projects investigating ways of accessing pupils’ views about what helps or hinders their learning and participation at school. This paper reports on the usefulness of questioning techniques to consult children about barriers and support to participation.

1. Introduction

There is now global recognition of both of children’s rights to take part in education and to have their views respected, and this is helping to drive progress towards equality of opportunity for all children, including those with disabilities (UNCRC; EU Article 13 Equal Treatment Directive). In recent years, we have developed much greater understanding about the ways in which social and environmental barriers can constitute a major problem for many disabled people (Oliver, 1996; Shakespeare, 2006). This increased awareness means that more buildings are now designed to accommodate wheelchairs, regulate lighting and improve audibility, and educators have built up a repertoire of strategies to help children with disabilities to access the curriculum.

In UK, these changes are due in part to changes in legislation to encourage service providers to adopt a more proactive approach to equality promotion. Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 2005 extended definition of disability and introduced Disability Equality Duty, a legal duty on all public sector organizations to promote equality of opportunity for disabled people. This signaled a more holistic and proactive approach to promoting disability equality, which continues under the new Equality Act of 2010. The DDA widened the meaning of disability to include individuals with impairment where the difficulty may be largely invisible to schools (e.g. mental health difficulties or medical conditions where the treatment is effective in offsetting the impact of the condition in the school setting). The more proactive approach to equality promotion signalled by the act encourages schools to be mindful of these invisible disabilities as well as the more obvious difficulties made apparent by the presence of wheelchairs, hearing aids and other physical aids.

If removing obstacles to learning and participation is a major priority, we need to find out as much as we can about the disabled children in our schools. However, it is not always straightforward to work out exactly what we
can or should do to promote equality of opportunity. The concept of ‘equal treatment’ of children in schools brings with it tensions and dilemmas (Norwich, 2008); sometimes this can mean treating all pupils the same (making sure all pupils go on school trip including those with mobility and behaviour difficulties) and sometimes it means treating pupils differently (sitting children with a hearing impairment near the front of the class so that they are better able to lip read). It is equally importantly, therefore, to collect data from children themselves about things that help/hinder their learning, and promote/prevent their full participation. We therefore need to identify ways to consult disabled children, taking into account their different modes of communication, while not singling them out as different.

2. Purpose of Study

As part of government funded projects to assist schools and local authorities in fulfilling their disability equality duty, we have investigated ways of accessing pupils’ views about what helps or hinders their learning and participation at school (Porter et al., 2008; 2010). We were aiming to produce a collection of activities to help teachers access children’s views. These ranged from more flexible, open-ended activities which could be tailored to fit the interests and communication needs of particular children, to more structured activities where the content and processes were set out in advance. We wanted to develop these ideas with teachers to find out what would work in reality, and then put together guidance on choice of activity to suit school context, staffing levels, pupil groupings and the age and communication needs of pupils involved. This paper reports on one aspect of our findings, namely the usefulness of questioning techniques to consult children about barriers and support to participation, and relates mainly to data collected for the study published in 2008.

3. Methods

Six activities were developed to collect data on pupil views on the barriers and supports to participation in school activities. These were designed with a range of communication needs and ages in mind, together with a concern to produce activities that could be accessed in a group, in pairs or individually. Three of these activities involved open-ended approaches where the child’s or group’s interests shaped the activities:

- **Good and Bad Things About School**, based on Talking Mats (Cameron & Murphy 2002) using a simple symbol array to record things that make school difficult and things that help by sorting pictures of activities, people and places.
- **Point to Point**, a concrete approach focusing on specific events that the child identifies as good or bad.
- **Nominal Group Technique**: encourages contributions from everyone which are narrowed down during discussion. then ranks contributions through a voting system.

The remaining three activities were based on question and answer routines:

- **Younger Child Interview Schedule** asked questions about children’s favourite things about school as well as those aspects they didn’t like doing, and what would make these activities easier.
- **Online Child Questionnaire** invited pupils to rate their experiences in school, in the classroom, in different types of lesson, and around the school. It asked pupils what helps in those activities and what makes them more difficult. It also asks them if they have any disability or difficulty. A hard copy of this questionnaire was also made available.
- **Symbol questionnaire** asked 11 closed questions exploring good and bad things about school, using Widgit symbols. It also included a disability question.

Representatives from schools were briefed about all six activities and provided with written guidance, along with a researcher contact to consult over uncertainties. So that children with disabilities should not be singled out, the
activities were mostly carried out with whole classes of children, from 3 age groups of children aged between 4-5, 8-9 and 11-12 years old, in both mainstream and special schools. Teachers filled in evaluation forms to document how the activities had been carried out and what they had found out, and a sample of 10 settings was visited by the research team to explore this in more detail. In addition, the research team had access to the full results from the online questionnaire. Results were collated and analysed to reveal children’s views on barriers and support to learning, and teachers’ views on the usefulness of the different activities.

4. Findings

4.1. Use of different activities

Table 1 shows how schools in different sectors used the six activities. Forty-five schools used at least one activity with the target year groups, and 40% schools tried out more than one type of activity for data collection, with some schools using four different activities. Some schools integrated these activities into their ongoing programme (collecting information about likes and dislikes as part of learning about data-handling activities) or Special Events (“Happy Week”/Equality week).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Secondary</th>
<th>Special</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open-ended activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking Mats</td>
<td>8 (238)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
<td>9 (240)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point to point</td>
<td>2 (6)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group</td>
<td>4 (131)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4 (131)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question and Answer activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview schedule</td>
<td>9 (259)</td>
<td>2 (128)</td>
<td>5 (30)</td>
<td>16 (417)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Questionnaire</td>
<td>16 (832)</td>
<td>8 (849)</td>
<td>1 (7)</td>
<td>25 (1688)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbol Questionnaire</td>
<td>8 (124)</td>
<td>1 (15)</td>
<td>11 (158)</td>
<td>20 (297)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total schools using at least one activity (no. using 2+ activities)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total pupils participating</td>
<td>1529</td>
<td>992</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>2774</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A greater range of activities was employed in the primary and special schools, where there is a much wider range of communication needs, but overall the more structured activities based on simple question and answer techniques were used much more often than the activities that required customisation for individual children. Teachers’ comments frequently mentioned the short time scale of the project (due to externally imposed limitations and
proximity to Christmas) suggesting that pressure of time had influenced their choice of activity; the questionnaire and interview schedule could be used off the shelf and required little preparation. Question and answer techniques are also something that all teachers readily understood, where the other techniques were unfamiliar and perhaps had less immediate attraction for busy teachers. Some schools adapted the easy-to-understand question-based activities by adding elements from the open-ended activities (adding symbols to interview schedule or using talking mats as interview prompts). In other schools, teachers persisted with the easy-to-use activities even though they were clearly not well-suited to the children who were taking part (using the online questionnaire with young children who could not read the questions).

4.2. Children’s responses

There is not enough space in this paper to do more than present a brief overview of children’s responses to question and answer techniques. The questions in the interview schedule and the online questionnaire enabled children to draw attention to aspects of the environment such as levels of noise, overcrowding and a widespread dissatisfaction with the school toilets. We noticed a shift in focus from the physical to social; younger children’s comments tended to concentrate on the physical aspects of barriers and supports, while social aspects were more important for older children. This meant that for secondary pupils, relationships with and help from other people were more important than physical supports and adaptations to the environment, and difficulties with peer relationships, bullying and name-calling were frequently mentioned as barriers to learning and participation.

While younger children wanted more one-to-one support from the teacher, children in middle and older age groups mentioned other aspects of pedagogy which made learning easier; both children both with and without disabilities wanted work pitched at the right level, along with good explanations and clear instructions for whole class.

5. Discussion

It is probably fair to say that the majority of children’s responses did not produce many surprises, but there were plenty of examples where teachers found out something about the way things normally happened in school that made life difficult for children, and about which otherwise they would have remained ignorant. These ranged from discovering during ‘circle time’ using the interview schedule that children didn’t like assembly because they all got too hot, and discovering from the online questionnaire that someone in their class was very unhappy because of bullying.

The different modes of questioning involved different levels of interaction between teacher and child; the interview schedule consisted of oral questions from teacher to (mainly young) children, and teachers reported that very young children often looked to them for the “right answer” when they were asked about aspects of school that they did or did not like. We also observed this being used with older children as a written exercise, with the teacher reading out and explaining the questions and children writing responses. The symbol questionnaire had been designed by adults trying to imagine the sort of answers which the child might make, and often supporting the children to decode the symbols and select responses. The online questionnaire was the only activity where an adult did not mediate responding; children responded to questions by selecting sad to smiley face symbols and adding comments to explain their choice of symbol. Teachers did, however, offer suggestions to children who were unsure about how to respond and also introduced the activity.

The teacher was therefore present to some extent in all the activities, and this meant that their attitudes could influence children’s responses. For example, teachers using interview schedule mentioned in their evaluation they had had to keep reminding children that they were to think about “problems with taps and doorways and things like
that” and not the problems with other children that the pupils kept writing about; the teachers’ own perception of
disability as something to do with wheelchairs and physical difficulties was masking the children’s concerns with
being called names by their classmates. Children who could read and write were able to use the online questionnaire
to give their views, and for children with the required level of literacy, this proved to be a powerful channel to voice
their concerns and share their preferences. But children who could not communicate by print and/or symbol were
reliant to some extent on adults, and therefore on adults’ perceptions of their problems, which brings with it the
possibility that their true views might not be expressed.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

In those instances where techniques were not sensitive enough to support consultation with individual pupils
(often the very pupils who were experiencing barriers to learning) children needed activities customised to meet
their needs, but which did not single them out as different. This takes time, not only to prepare appropriate materials
but to introduce children to the concept of self-advocacy and to develop the confidence to express their own
opinions. For the more vulnerable children in our classrooms, this requires patience and sensitivity. Negotiating a
path between equal treatments and drawing attention to difference also requires sophisticated and sympathetic
consideration about what inclusion really means. If inclusion is adopted merely as a legal duty it can lead to
performative compliance rather than constructive engagement with the sensitive issues about difference and
diversity. This has implications for how teachers can be supported through professional development to work
through the dilemmas which arise.

References

Cameron, L and Murphy, J (2002) Enabling young people with a learning disability to make choices at a time of transition, British Journal of
Learning Disabilities, 30:105-11. See also http://www.talkingmats.com


