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Hearing their Voices: the role of SENCOs in facilitating the participation of all learners

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Background

Although some academic literature can be found which examines how the voices of children and young people are heard prior to 1989, since the publication of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989), there has been a widespread upsurge in focus on the role of children and young people within society, whether their opinions and perspectives are listened to and whether they have agency to influence decisions being made about their lives (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004; Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007; Tisdall *et al.*, 2009).

Since its publication, the UNCRC has been ratified in every country in the world with the exception of the United States of America. For the purposes of this chapter, which will focus specifically on the English context, the UNCRC was ratified by the United Kingdom government which holds responsibility for education provision within England in 1991. The ratification of the UNCRC principles within England would seem to guarantee all children and young people the rights and freedoms children and young people outlined within the document. Indeed, the Children's Commissioner Review in 2010 there was a 'commitment that the government will give due consideration to the CRC articles when making new policy and legislation' (Teather, 2010:[online]).

Robinson *et al.* (2020) highlight that the first part of Article 12 is potentially the most influential part of the UNCRC when considering education legislation, policy and practice:

‘State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child’ (UNCRC, 1989:5).

It is easy now to under-estimate the ground-breaking nature of the UNCRC and the implications that this document had for the lives of children and young people across the globe (Smith, 2011). Historically and culturally, in many countries, children and young people had not enjoyed many of the rights and freedoms that the UNCRC advocated (Aries, 1962; Corsaro, 1997; James *et al.*, 1998; Postman, 1982). Historical attitudes towards children and young people contributed to long-held beliefs within Western societies that position children and young people as requiring protection due to their status as minors (Aries, 1962). Wyness (2006) notes that children and young people are not physically as mature as adults, therefore were historically treated as different to adults; viewed as ‘becomings’ rather than ‘beings’ and therefore requiring to be protected until they had reached maturity. Historically, children and young people were not viewed as capable of making informed decisions about their lives; it was considered essential that those decisions should be made by adults in positions of power – their parents, teachers and other professionals.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, this historical viewpoint was challenged by an international group of sociologists known collectively known as the ‘new sociologists of childhood’ (Corsaro, 1997; James *et al.*, 1998; Wyness, 2006; Heath *et al.*, 2009). These writers claimed that childhood as a concept was socially constructed and instead of thinking of children and young people as requiring to be only protected, children and young people should be seen as,

‘active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of their societies in which they live’ (James and Prout, 1990: 7).

The ‘new sociologists of childhood’ group were influential in changing perspectives of children as active social agents within their own lives proposing that children had the ability to contribute to decisions about their own lives as outlined within the UNCRC. This original document and subsequent national policy documents obviously have implications for the children and young people’s participation in educational processes and the relationships with adults in school settings; leading to disruption of the traditional power relationships between staff and pupils.

For the purposes of this chapter, adoption of these ideas of children’s place in society and specifically in schools has clear implications for SENCOs who must consider how all young people, including those with special educational needs, might have the opportunity to contribute their perspectives on decisions being made about their educational experience.

The Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice

The role and remit of the SENCO in educational provision in England is set out in the SEND Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015). There is clear evidence within the Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015) of the translation of Article 12 of the UNCRC into educational legislation. The Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015) clearly states that there is a clear focus on the participation of children and young people – and their parents – in decision making at both individual and strategic levels.

At the beginning of the Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015) it is stated that the principles of the document are designed to support the participation of children, their parents and young

people in decision making, greater choice and control for young people and parents over support offered and provided and successful preparation for adulthood, including independent living and employment (2015:18-19).

This stated aim to support children, young people and their parents to take an active part in decision making and planning for educational provision aligns with the Children and Families Act 2014. This legislation states that in relation to disabled children and young people and those with special educational needs (SEN), must have regard to:

- the views, wishes and feelings of the child or young person, and the child's parents
- the importance of the child or young person, and the child's parents, participating as fully as possible in decisions, and being provided with the information and support necessary to enable participation in those decisions
- the need to support the child or young person, and the child's parents, in order to facilitate the development of the child or young person and to help them achieve the best possible educational and other outcomes, preparing them effectively for adulthood

Both the Children and Families Act 2014 and the Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015) as legislation and policy guidance have clear implications for the role and remit of the SENCO to take a leadership role in demonstrating the importance of involving children, young people and their parents in all element of educational provision. For example, in relation to Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and on behalf of governing bodies, all SENCOs must ensure that young people and parents are actively supported in contributing to needs assessments, developing and reviewing Education Health and Care (EHC) plans.

Examples given within the Code of Practice of how this must be achieved are that SENCOs must:

- ensure the child's parents or the young person are fully included in the EHC needs assessment process from the start, are fully aware of their opportunities to offer views and information, and are consulted about the content of the plan (Chapter 9)
- consult children with SEN or disabilities, and their parents and young people with SEN or disabilities when reviewing local SEN and social care provision (Chapter 4)
- consult them in developing and reviewing their Local Offer (Chapter 4)
- make arrangements for providing children with SEN or disabilities, and their parents, and young people with SEN or disabilities with advice and information about matters relating to SEN and disability (Chapter 2) (2015: 20).

The Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015) also outlines the responsibility of the SENCO in relation to children and young people with SEN but no EHC plan. It is envisioned that pupils with SEN will normally be educated with their peers in mainstream settings and it is expected that the SENCO will provide a leadership role in advising classroom practitioners on the most advantageous manner in which to include these pupils in classroom learning; be it with a focus on pedagogy, curriculum or ongoing assessment.

It has been noted by Beaton (2020) that many current classroom practices are underpinned by theories that in their turn are underpinned by understandings of children and young people as active agents in their own lives in line with the writing of the new sociologists of childhood.

The traditional view of children and young people as 'tabula rasa' into which teachers poured

knowledge with transmission pedagogies are viewed as inappropriate in modern classrooms. In contrast new classroom practices such as formative assessment (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Reay and Wiliam, 1999; Pryor and Crossouard, 2008, 2010) are based on the idea that pupils can and should take an active participatory role in their learning; discussing their progress and next steps in learning with each other and with their teachers. Black and Wiliam (1989) outline the following elements which they consider essential to the effective use of formative assessment in schools:

- Finding out where pupils are in their learning through dialogue
- Agreeing clear learning intentions with pupils and providing feedback that helps them to achieve these goals
- Sharing success criteria with pupils based on agreed learning intentions
- Developing meta-cognitive skills to enable peer and self-assessment as key components of learning
- Enabling young people to take greater ownership of their learning.

Although not all pedagogical innovations have been proved to be successful in the classroom, there is significant evidence that many of the innovations that include pupils being involved in dialogue and decisions about various aspects of their education result in improved educational outcomes for pupils in classrooms. The leadership role of the SENCO must include guiding other staff in how these pedagogies might be implemented for those pupils with SEN within their classrooms alongside their peers. This leadership role will contribute to the aspiration of the Code of Practice that ‘children and young people with SEN engage in the activities of the school alongside pupils who do not have SEN’ (DfE and DoH, 2015:92) and children and young people with SEN ‘achieve their best, become confident individuals living

fulfilling lives and make a successful transition into adulthood, whether into employment, further or higher education or training' (DfE and DoH, 2015:92) as outlined in the next section.

Benefits

During the last twenty years, academic literature has outlined the benefits to educational processes that can accrue if student voice is implemented correctly with pupils both with and without SEN. For example, Flutter and Rudduck (2004) outline a list of benefits based on extensive research over a period of ten years in a wide variety of schools. These are helpfully listed under the following headings: benefits for pupils, benefits for teachers and benefits for schools more widely.

Benefits for Pupils

Flutter and Rudduck (2004) suggest that involving pupils in self-assessment and decisions about their learning can lead to the promotion of higher order thinking skills such as meta-cognition. As the pupils discuss their learning with teachers and their peers, this permits them to develop a more informed understanding of their learning, take a more serious attitude to their education and potentially enhance their self-confidence. Through this process of entering dialogue with their teachers about their learning, they will no longer act as merely recipients of learning but begin to make judgements about how they learn best.

Benefits for Teachers

The benefits for the teachers of involving the pupils in dialogue described by Flutter and Rudduck (2004) about their learning are significant. As pupils begin to view themselves as in collaboration with the teachers in their learning, this can lead to improved pupil-teacher

relationships. Pupils can offer feedback to the teachers on the approaches to teaching, learning and assessment used in their classrooms. Pupils also can provide key information about their progress in learning and can identify barriers they are experiencing as individuals which can assist teachers collaboratively identify appropriate next steps.

Of course, the teacher remains the professional with knowledge and experience of curriculum and pedagogy, but the information provided by the pupils can be invaluable to inform the professional decisions they make (Beaton, 2020).

Benefits for Schools

Finally, Flutter and Rudduck (2004) suggest that there are potential benefits for the schools when pupil voice is implemented effectively. In addition to a more positive learning culture throughout the school, involving pupils in discussion about teaching and learning may suggest new directions for school improvement planning (Fielding 2001, 2004).

As leaders in learning, of course, SENCOs' promotion of student voice activity within classrooms will have wide benefits for all pupils but it might be argued that the benefits for pupils, teachers and the school are even greater when implemented with pupils with SEN. For example, though at times challenging to enact, facilitating the voices of pupils with SEN can provide invaluable information for teachers about the pedagogies that pupils with SEN find most helpful in progress in their learning. As pupils with SEN can experience atypical ways of learning, engaging them in dialogue about their experiences as to what is working for them and what might be a barrier to their learning can inform future pedagogical decision making (Ravet, 2007; Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007).

More widely, Ravet (2007) and Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) identify additional benefits to those identified by Flutter and Rudduck (2004). They suggest that enacting pupil voice may promote inclusion and foster tolerance of diversity. These benefits speak closely to the role of the SENCO as they are closely linked to the enhancement of social skills and emotional literacy which is often developed in alignment with the implementation of pupil voice

Challenges

Implementation of pupil voice within schools is not without its challenges. The Welsh government who implemented the UNCRC directly into their national legislation in 2011 (Lundy *et al.*, 2013) followed by the Scottish government enacting the same process in 2018 (Scottish Government, 2018). In contrast, the UK government, who have responsibility for the English education system, stated that they did not intend to include the UNCRC directly into legislation (DCSF, 2010); instead committing to only ‘consider’ the implication of the Articles of the UNCRC when making new policy and legislation. This results in the UK government having no legal obligation to ensure that the UNCRC is effectively implemented within English educational policies or processes.

I’Anson *et al.* (2017) highlight that the translation of the UNCRC into either national legislation or indirectly into policy and practice such as the Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015) has been fraught with difficulties. I’Anson *et al.* (2017) and Robinson *et al.* (2020) discuss that when the UNCRC is translated into legislation, and from there into policy discourse, professional expectations and practice, the aspirational principles underpinning the UNCRC are often diluted., Robinson *et al.* (2019) through their analysis of the translation process of the UNCRC to the English educational system identify a number of instances

where the principles have been diluted in such a way that they are less effective than might be expected.

This is particularly so for those pupils with SEN. For example, Robinson *et al.* (2020) point out that the proposal ‘there will be recognition by those listening to children that views may be expressed in on-verbal, as well as verbal ways’ (UNCRC, Principle 5) is not translated practically into English educational policy. Thus, those children who may be able to express their viewpoints about the assessment and implementation of EHC Plans through non-verbal ways do not have this option supported within the UK government policy documentation

Beaton (2020) also highlights an ongoing challenge to the effective implementation of pupil voice in schools. Beaton (2020) highlights that teachers’ professional identity is predicated on their professional knowledge and desire to protect the children and young people in their care; believing that an essential element of their remit is to make professionally informed decisions about pupils’ educational progress. The teachers in Beaton’s study (2020) demonstrated a view of their pupils as innocents who required protection and were not sufficiently ready to participate in such an ‘adult’ activity as dialogue about their education. These findings are similar to those of Gallagher (2009) and Rudduck and McIntyre (2007). This assumption that children and young peoples’ do not possess the ability to participate in dialogue about their learning can be particularly acute when the children are very young (Wall, 2017) or have SEN (Franklin and Sloper, 2009).

However, for those adopting the SENCO role, a key element of their leadership role is to ensure that the voices of all children and young people are listened to in authentic and meaningful ways. Franklin and Sloper (2009) in their study of how social workers view

participatory practice with children and young people with disability identified that social workers worked with a concept of ‘ideal participation’ considering anything less than ‘a child taking part fully in a review meeting or contributing to complex decision-making was not valid’ (Franklin and Sloper, 2009: 7). In contrast, Hajdukova, Hornby and Cushman state that students with SEN can provide ‘knowledge, and unique insights into the educational system’ (2016:207). It is within the remit of the SENCO to consider and lead on the implementation of pupil voice in innovative and creative ways that suit the abilities of children and young people with SEN and permit them to contribute.

Many teachers may consider that inclusion of children and young people in dialogue about their learning is time consuming (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). It is acknowledged that classroom practitioners in the English education system are over-burdened by workload; much of it administrative and externally imposed. A key message which might be communicated by an informed SENCO within the school is that pupil voice and enactment of participatory approaches that include all children and young people in decision making about their learning is not an additional task but one that will inform more effective teaching and learning. In contrast to viewing it as an additional task that must be carried out as it is assessed by external bodies such as Ofsted, SENCOs can advocate that the practice become intrinsic to classroom life with many benefits for both staff and pupils.

It should be noted that pupils themselves may not initially be keen to participate in this type of consultation and dialogue and set up barriers to its effective implementation (Pollard *et al.*, 1997). The pupils may not be aware of the potential benefits which may accrue through their participation and initially may lack confidence in their ability to contribute meaningfully. However, Gallagher (2009) and Flutter and Rudduck (2004) note that if the process is fully

explained the pupils and it proves not to be tokenistic, then their interest and willingness to be involved will increase.

In summary, teachers and pupils need to have the benefits of authentic pupil voice to be explained to them and this can be a role that the SENCO can lead with – being informed of the benefits that will accrue to all.

Role of SENCO in Leading Student Voice

The question remains as to how children and young people might be included in this type of dialogue and agency about their educational experience. It has already been noted that the processes which are effective when seeking to engage children without SEN may not necessarily be those that are effective with children who do have identified SEN (Wall 2017; Franklin and Sloper, 2009). Lundy (2007) states that if Article 12 of the UNCRC is to be effectively implemented then adults must provide children the space and opportunity to express their views, facilitate their ability to express those views, listen to what they have to say and, when appropriate, act on what they have heard.

For many children and young people with SEN, how their views are facilitated may be different to traditional means that may have been effective with other pupils. In line with Malaguzzi's suggestion that all children are born with 'hundred languages', the term used within the Reggio Emilia approach to describe the diverse ways children have of expressing themselves and relating to the world (Moss, 2016), it might be suggested that these 'hundred languages' must be utilised to facilitate young people with SEN in their participation in dialogue and decision-making about their learning. Wall *et al.* (2019) note that in most cases verbal language is privileged. Additionally, as pupils progress through their schooling, it

might be argued that the written word comes to be privileged over verbal language.

Challenging this, Wall *et al.* (2019:268) suggest when facilitating the voices of young children, although this is true also of those children and young people with SEN,

‘any definition of voice will be, by necessity, broader and more inclusive of a greater range of communication strategies beyond words and cannot exclude behaviour, actions, pauses in action, silences, body language, glances, movement, and artistic expression’.

To enable this facilitation of voice Wall *et al.* (2019) elucidate a set of principles or factors which can be adapted to the specific context of the SENCO which can be utilised as lenses to examine the current practice of pupil voice and consider how it might be enhanced:

definition, power, inclusivity, listening, time and space, approaches, processes. It is argued within their work that each of these factors must be considered by practitioners if pupil voice is to be implemented effectively for all children and young people in educational settings.

To aid the practitioner, resources have been provided which can be used either by a teacher reflectively considering his/her practice on her own or within staff groups as they collaboratively enhance the provision of their school

(<http://www.voicebirthtoseven.co.uk/talking-point-posters/>). These resources have been developed and trialled with practitioners in a range of educational settings including with practitioners who work with pupils with SEN.

Included in the resources are colourful posters which can aid the reflections of the practitioner/s allowing practitioners to recognise the work they are already engaged in and challenging them to consider how this might be enhanced.

To further challenge the practitioners in how they are implementing each of the principles outlined in the posters, Wall *et al.* (2019) provide additional reflective questions which can be

used for individual reflection or staff discussion. For example, the questions aligning with the poster on democracy focus on issues of inclusion:

- Do I marginalise some voices?
- Does everyone have an equal voice?
- Is there a time or space for minority voice?
- What does that look like?
- How is it mediated?
- Do I value some voices more than others?
- Is opting out a key part of inclusion?
- How are differing opinions and views included?
- How is disagreement mediated?

The resources can allow the SENCO to take a leadership role in fostering an inclusive approach where diversity is celebrated and dignity and respect are key to how children and young people participate in making decisions about their learning based on the notion of inclusivity which allows for everyone to be seen as a competent actor and holder of rights.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the legislative and ethical issues surrounding listening to all children and young people including those with SEN and the leadership role that a SENCO can adopt in promoting this practice within their educational context. The chapter is based on the proposal that decisions about educational processes need to represent the experiences and viewpoints of all pupils (Walmsley and Johnson, 2003) and that as Mitra (2009) states those students who are not succeeding in our educational provision may be the most important voices to be heard.

As such, it is essential that schools and their staff take time to consider current understandings of pupils and how their voices are heard within educational processes. Only by subsequently reframing those understandings can the traditional power relationships be disrupted within our educational provision. This disruption will permit pupils, including those with SEN, to share the unique knowledge and understanding they hold about their experiences of that educational provision and how it might be enhanced. This is a key role for SENCOs to model in their own practice and take a strategic lead through the promotion of creative, courageous and innovative approaches to allow all pupils to have their voices heard.

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