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## Listening to young children with disabilities: Experiences of quality in mainstream primary education

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**Listening to young children with disabilities: experiences of quality in mainstream primary education**

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## **Abstract**

All children should have access to quality education through a child-centred pedagogy (UNESCO, 1994). An inclusive, child-centred pedagogy uses a strength-based view of children which recognises each child as unique and competent, providing children with multiple opportunities to explore and learn at their own pace. However, competing tensions in mainstream primary education in England can impact this through a performative school culture that focusses on progress and attainment rather than the successful inclusion of all children including those with disabilities. This adult-centric view of education quality does not consider children's experiences of what happens in mainstream primary education, through their perspectives. The research described here uses methodology that actively listens to young children with developmental disabilities themselves to understand what is important and valuable to them.

Four case studies present children's experience of education in different English primary schools, using a range of photography activities, guided tours, and interviews. Methods illicit rich detail and novel understandings of experiences from the views of young children with developmental disabilities, whose voices have tended to be excluded from research. The study demonstrates ways in which young children can develop self-advocacy through opportunities to share their voice and understanding of education. Findings reveal the significance of children's involvement in the different spaces and objects associated with experiencing mainstream education, and the different types of pedagogy found in education that may or may not offer opportunities for self-advocacy for children with developmental disabilities.

**Key words** quality support, children with developmental disabilities, primary education, inclusion

## **Key insights**

The main issue that this paper addresses is the lack of perspectives from young children with developmental disabilities in their experiences of quality mainstream primary education. Children's views are required in order to explore their real lived experiences of what is important to them and increase understanding of how to support their education.

The novel methodology in this paper provides insights into the experiences of children with developmental disabilities in learning how to be a primary school pupil, managing transitions between classes or activities, and the different spaces and objects that can cause challenges.

## **Introduction**

Inclusion is a contentious area of contradictions and tensions, termed *illusionary* by Hodkinson (2012). One definition offered by Florian and Beaton (2018) suggests inclusion is a pedagogical approach that supports children's individual differences without marginalising individuals based on their needs. The researcher uses the human rights view of inclusion that focusses on acceptance and a sense of belonging (Hodkinson, 2012) which can be achieved in any setting that ensures children actively participate. However, inclusion is also an important political stance that can help address disablism in society by highlighting forms of segregation that prevent people from understanding how diversity can be celebrated and offer unique opportunities. A social justice view of inclusion may suggest that special education provision is a form of discrimination (Norwich, 2009; Thomas and Loxley, 2007) and

other countries such as Norway chose to implement the inclusion vision by closing special schools, resulting in over 90% of children with special educational needs attending mainstream classrooms (Cameron, 2017).

Internationally, the inclusive debate argues that all children should receive a quality education in their local regular school (UNESCO, 1994). The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994, p.viii) stated “those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs”. Others have argued that a quality education can be received in any education provision that meets the child’s needs, but this relies on the provision and staff having appropriate knowledge and understanding of those needs (Gulliver, 2016).

There are over 1.5 million children with special educational needs in England who require support in schools (National statistics, 2023). England’s decision to retain specialist provision, against UNCRPD article 24 which recognises the inclusion of all individuals with disabilities in education that meets their needs with appropriate support, has left England at risk of knowledge and access to specialist pedagogy and resources remaining situated in special education provision, as numbers of children with disabilities attending special schools continue to rise (National statistics, 2023). This partial commitment to inclusion enabled England to reserve the right for children with disabilities to be educated in specialist provision if this was deemed more appropriate to meet their needs. This dual track education system in England offers a variation in how a child may access education provision from, for example, dual placement at both settings, or a resource unit attached to a mainstream setting (Norwich, 2009).

In mainstream education settings, guidance exists to support schools in the form of the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) which promotes the self-advocacy of children with disabilities and their families. However, challenges occur with different interpretations of the guidance, variation in local authority resources, funding and priorities of schools. The SEND Code of Practice dictates that quality first teaching from the class teacher should meet all children’s needs, and that further identified needs that require bespoke, or specialist intervention can be met within a graduated approach, before a child requires an education, health and care plan (EHCP) (DfE, 2015). EHCPs, a legal document drawn by professionals from education, social care and health detailing support and long-term aspirations of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEN/D) (National Statistics, 2023), should include the children’s own views of education, although barriers exist when eliciting the voices of children with disabilities in the EHCP process (Sharma, 2021).

Growing trends show increasing numbers of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities attending mainstream primary schools, as well as a rise in the number of education, health and care plans (EHCPs) reflect a concerning national picture. With the increase of children with EHCPs and identified levels of SEN in England, it is a poignant time to decide how, if we are to keep a dual track system of special and mainstream provision, can education provision ensure children with disabilities are not excluded, and access quality education.

### **Competing tensions for inclusion**

Statutory schooling begins in England after the child turns 5 years old; however often children start school at age 4 years where they will access the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The EYFS is a statutory framework which states the areas of learning and development for children under 5 years old. EYFS pedagogy is heavily influenced by theorists such as Montessori (2004), Reggio Emilia (Edwards, 1993) and child-centred principles that promote an enabling environment that reflects the

importance of appropriate and well-considered resources, room layout and structures that support all children.

However, external pressures exist which can impact the quality of education provision, such as the introduction of the Reception baseline tests for children age 4 and 5 years old, and a focus on performativity that judges teachers on their performance to ensure children reach certain goals (Wilkins, 2015). This counters the child-centred principle that “children develop and learn at different rates” as suggested by Elkind (1987, p1) and Clark (2022) who calls for an unhurried approach that recognises children learn at different paces.

Performative frameworks that focus on data are particularly intensive in England (Wilkins, 2015) as teachers are held accountable for improving school standards through learner outcomes. Whilst children with disabilities may not achieve these results, the focus on data provides teachers with a competing tension between the agenda for measuring progress of attainment and embracing diversity through inclusion that requires a different way of viewing and understanding progress that may not be related to the school’s view of achievement (Glazzard, 2011). Furthermore, researchers have highlighted concerns over the increasing datafication of the EYFS that contrasts early years pedagogy (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2016). These tensions within education continue to deny children’s voices by using high stakes testing procedures to measure certain parts of children’s experience of education that does not necessarily show their own interests and understandings.

### **Children with developmental disabilities**

Disability is a complex, relational phenomenon (Shakespeare and Watson, 2010). The author uses a critical realist view in acknowledging different levels of reality including physical, medical, socio-economic and cultural (Bhaskar and Danermark, 2006). For children with a developmental disability, their learning difficulties are a part of their daily life, as well as the structural, physical, and political issues that play a part in disabling individuals.

Views towards disabilities have shifted significantly from individuals with impairments, towards recognising how society may disable individuals through disabling environments, discourse and attitudes (Barnes, 1996). Swain and French’s (2000) affirmation model views disability as a difference to be celebrated, whilst the social model suggests schools are responsible for changing their environment and policies. Early childhood pedagogies influenced by Montessori (2004), Regio Emilia (Edwards, 1993) and child-centred principles similarly promote an enabling environment that supports all children.

A strong critique of the social model is the over-simplification of the real lives of people who have an impairment that is an important aspect of their life (Shakespeare, 2006). Individuals with developmental disabilities were not considered as carefully in the conceptualisation of the social model and follows the historical underrepresentation of individuals with disabilities in research. Gulliver (2023) suggests individuals learn to navigate a path between managing various models of disabilities, for example, as individuals with impairments experiencing a society designed and built by neurotypical individuals, as well as using different views of disabilities in order to access appropriate support. Therefore, this study focuses on the lives of children with developmental disabilities and their experiences of education, through a critical realist lens (Bhaskar and Danermark, 2006) that positions disability as both socially constructed and medically diagnosable. Often, developmental disabilities such as Down Syndrome, Williams Syndrome and Fragile-X Syndrome can be diagnosed medically from an early age, which means children are likely to participate in the EHCP process that details their provision.

Definitions of developmental disabilities use the medical discourse of impairments, diagnosis, disorder and abnormality. This can be unhelpful when children are compared to a 'typical' or 'norm' as it can perpetuate inequalities through othering and discrimination (Shakespeare, 2006). Additionally, schools have the added difficulty of understanding disability through fixed categories in order to meet children's needs whilst maintaining a more affirmative and social model view that celebrates the individual and recognises the social and organisational structures that can disable individuals. Usually, a developmental disability is defined through categories of level of intellectual impairment, or learning disability, but this is only one aspect of how having a disability is experienced. This research sought to work alongside children with developmental disabilities, through positioning them as the experts in their own lives, capable of sharing their experiences of having a disability and attending a primary school.

### **Quality education for children with disabilities**

The EYFS is recognised as a provision that should support all children due to its relational, pedagogic approach prompting staff to build responsive relationships with children (Clark, 2022). This pedagogy relies on practitioners to 'tune into' children's own experiences, in order to recognise each child's uniqueness, learning priorities and pace. The principles of the EYFS, recognised by researchers as a child-centred practice (Georgeson *et al*, 2018) reflects a strength-based view of children and is even more important for young children with disabilities, who may be at risk of being viewed as less than capable, when compared to their 'typically developing' peers.

When considering the quality of education for children with disabilities, the researcher recognises quality as a political concept (Moss, 2016) influenced by expectations of equity rather than equality. When children have access to the appropriate tools, communication, resources that meets their individual needs, this can lead to quality education. Quality in the early years has been investigated in several areas, including challenges in the profession of being misunderstood and undervalued (Nutbrown, 2021). Research frequently points to the issue of having the youngest, most vulnerable children be taught by the least qualified staff (Cullen *et al*. 2017). In comparison, research shows that high quality training and qualifications aligns closely with successful positive outcomes for children (Nutbrown, 2021). However, there is minimal research that considers children with disabilities' own views on what is important to them in their education (Nind, Flewitt & Payler, 2010; Gulliver, 2023), particularly individuals with developmental disabilities (Palikara, Ashworth & Van Herwegen, 2018; Rix *et al*. 2020).

Undoubtedly, inclusion debates are complex, and it is important that we hear from the children themselves who experience a form of inclusion by attending a mainstream primary school. This paper presents research from a larger study that comprised case studies of four children with a developmental disability, age 5 and 6 years, attending a mainstream primary school. All children in the study began school at age 4 years and were in Year 1 or Year 2 at the time of the research. Different pedagogical approaches in schools reveal different priorities from formal learning to a free-flow continuous provision, and the management of support staff in offering varied opportunities for children to experience education.

### **Methodology**

Four case studies adapt a Mosaic approach methodology, using the view that children are co-constructors of knowledge, capable of participating in research about them (Clark, 2017). A case study approach enabled the researcher to conduct in-depth explorations in real-life settings, using an array of methods (Stake, 2005). Cases offer examples in research, to learn about particular situations for

individuals within a context, which in this study help illuminate some of the complexities of listening to children with a developmental disability in education.

An important aspect of the research was the role of the children who guided the methods. In contrast to a traditional deficit view of disability (Barnes, 1996), the Mosaic approach promotes a strength-based view that recognises children as skilful communicators and meaning-makers, who should be supported to actively contribute to research (Clark 2017). Through interviews with staff, the researcher gained a sense of the staff's interpretations of the children's experiences of education provision and support. However, it was the photography, guided tour and discussions with children that highlighted rich, insightful information about what the children were experiencing.

The researcher spent 1 week in each school with the children. The multi-method approach features children's own photographs, guided tours and photobooks combined with staff discussion and observations to gain deeper understanding of children's perspectives (Clark, 2017). Conducting research that did not rely on verbal speech but engaged in an active listening approach offered ways for the researcher and school staff to understand children's ideas and thoughts.

Table 1 shows useful information about the school population, which gives an indication of the percentage of children with SEN support and the size of the school. Current statistics show the number of children requiring SEN support rising to 13% in 2022/2023 (National Statistics, 2023) and three of the children attended schools with higher percentages of children with SEN support. Table 1 also gives an indication of the ways children chose to guide data collection. Voice recordings included several explorations of the audio recorder; making sounds and playing them back, exploring the camera, and talking about the photos taken on the guided tour. Similarly, videos listed captured the time of exploring the audio recorder, the photos taken and printed off, or what was in the researcher's bag, depending on what children were interested in.

<i>Table 1: Information about data collection</i>						
Child	Age (years)	Number of pupils in school	% of pupils with SEN Support	How data was recorded		
Ryan	6	621	20.7	Guided tour: 3 x photos taken on camera	Map: 3 x areas shown on tour	10 x voice recordings
Orla	5	207	14.8	Guided tour: 26 x Photos taken on camera	3 x photos stuck to poster	6 x voice recordings 1 x video
Wendy	5	434	10.3	Guided tour: 15 x photos taken on camera	4 x photos taken during photo discussion	6 x voice recordings
Sophie	5	724	14	Guided tour: Photos taken on school iPad	7 x Photos cut and made into scrapbook	18 x voice recordings 3 x video

Detailed, reflective fieldnotes were captured daily detailing observations, with an overall summary at the end of the week as well as semi-structured interviews with class teachers and support staff. However, methods mainly focussed on offering opportunities for young children with disabilities to

share their experiences, who have traditionally been marginalised and their voices excluded from research (Nind, Flewitt & Payler, 2010).

The research aim was to listen to children with disabilities to find out about their experiences of education, to share with families and settings the different ways of supporting the inclusion of children with developmental disabilities in school. The research question guiding the study asks; 'What do children with [developmental disability] show as important to them in their school'?

### **Theoretical framework**

This research is centred within an interpretivist paradigm which recognises several interpretations of reality subjective to the individual and situated within a certain context. The researcher has personal experience of having a sibling with a developmental disability, and extensive experience in working with children with disabilities in a range of educational settings. Working in both social care and education with children with a various disabilities required the researcher to understand how different children share their thoughts and ideas. This experience-based knowledge informs the research on how all children can communicate about experiences and what is important to them. Additionally, school staff in the study seemed to welcome the researcher through an authentic, collaborative, appreciative inquiry and staff were keen to identify ways of improving the provision for children with disabilities.

### **Ethics**

An ethically sensitive framework was embedded throughout the study. Informed consent was given by parents/carers and head teachers of schools who became a consent network (Nind, 2008) for children, whilst the children were specifically asked and closely monitored for signs of assent by the researcher and staff who knew them well. The researcher supported children to communicate in their preferred style, for example using a total communication approach that incorporated eye contact, facial expression, makaton sign language and simple speech, visual prompts and photographs. All children had some verbal communication and two were receiving speech and language therapy interventions. Although children's capacity may be impaired by cognitive difficulties, researchers can increase capacity by presenting information in an accessible way (Nind, 2008). The ethically sensitive approach ensured that the researcher protected the children in the study from harm and increased their capacity to understand in order to assent.

While all children in the study seemed excited and eager to interact with the researcher, doing research in a formal setting that positions adults as having the knowledge and authority brought some particular ethical considerations. Qualitative researchers have examined the concept of power between researchers and participants, particularly when those participants are children (Cocks, 2006; Punch, 2002). However, the researcher's conscientious approach to assent and close work with support staff meant that children were able to show examples of guiding, directing, managing and finishing participation in the research activities. The methodology also sought to shift perceived power away from the researcher as an adult and outsider towards the children as they guided and taught the researcher about their school, gathering information and suggesting how the activities were handled (Clark, 2017).

Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of staff, children and schools. The findings shared here derive from research from Orla, Ryan, Sophie and Wendy. All children had the same diagnosis of developmental disability; this has been removed from the study as a rare disability can be identifiable. This project met the requirements of university research degree regulations at [Name] University and



BERA (British Educational Research Association) ethical guidelines for research involving human participants.

Data was analysed through a narrative, reflexive thematic approach in order to create and interpret stories from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Data immersion involved increasing familiarity by re-reading fieldnotes, re-watching videos and summarising reflections through detailed notes. Interviews, videos and audio recordings were transcribed and coded under different categories. However, this formed only part of the children's experiences which felt more important to be shared through a narrative approach. An analysis framework was created which told the children's stories in layers, starting with their experience of being a primary school pupil; learning the rules, taking responsibility, managing transitions, then subsequent experiences of what having a developmental disability may be like; including sound sensitivities and experiences of anxiety. The next layer of analysis positioned the data from the view of managing inclusion in different primary schools, and offered implications for wider, ongoing challenges of support for children with diverse learning needs in mainstream primary schools.

The following findings focus on aspects of data relevant to what children found important to show about their school, starting with the elements of being a primary school pupil such as following the rules, experiencing transitions, and negotiating agency in a school context.

### **Findings and analysis**

Children shared their experiences of being a primary school pupil, which required them to learn classroom rules, routines and responsibility. The children were directly supported to learn the classroom rules, daily routines and develop responsibility for hanging up their bags and coats or knowing where to sit and stand. However, children's perceptions of what was important to them during the researcher visits were demonstrated in a more nuanced way through the objects and spaces they used daily.

#### **Being a primary school pupil**

The researcher visited Sophie in the middle of the autumn term of Year 1, and during the tour of the school, Sophie took photos of both the door of her classroom and the door of her old Reception classroom [Figure 1]. In the photograph-based activities, Sophie repeated the name of the previous class several times, suggesting this was important to her. The researcher raised this with teaching staff who then considered whether Sophie was still experiencing a transition from her old class.

*Insert figure 1: image of classroom door (copyright with authors)*

Sophie's class teacher shared:

She'd always look at my door but never come in. So, she was aware that that's the door she had to go into [when joining Year 1]. She was like [would say], "Apple class," but she'd never go into it... I know a transition book was sent home... There was a picture of me and the coat racks and the outside bit but not the inside (Class teacher, Year 1).

The photographs Sophie took seemed to reveal a transition period which revealed further opportunities for her class teacher to consider how to support transitions for children with disabilities in the future. Preparation for joining Year 1 had taken place mostly outside of the classroom, which meant Sophie previously had seen where to hang her coat or play outside, rather than spend time within the classroom. In her own research of her experiences of school, Sophie highlighted this sense of transition through taking photos and repeating the name of her old class, which enabled the staff

to consider how to support this and future transitions, by guiding Sophie to recognise the differences between her previous and current classes.

Sophie's experiences support previous research that highlights the significance of vertical transitions between different settings such as nursery to primary school, or one classroom to the next (González-Moreira, Ferreira & Vidal, 2021). Further, for children with specific developmental disabilities, Palikara, Ashworth & Van Herwegen (2018) argue transitions may be more challenging as children experience higher levels of anxiety through changes in daily routines, structure, and familiarity of support staff.

Interestingly, the class teacher also commented on Sophie's helpfulness when a new member of the class started a few weeks prior:

She's made a really good friend in one of the new girls who has just started as well. She started a couple of weeks ago and Sophie came up to me and [asks], "Can I show her where the toilet is?" (Class teacher, Year 1).

This is particularly interesting because Sophie might have been in a strong position to understand and support a new child to transition into the class, as she could relate to the experience of moving classrooms. By showing the new child the location of the toilets, she was also taking an active role in helping with her transition. This reflects Noddings' (2002) 'ethics of care' argument which proposes care as a fundamental aspect and goal of education, and that individuals who are cared-for will have more desire to care-about others. Sophie, who worked closely with a teaching assistant often throughout the day, could have been at risk of being someone who needed caring-for, but her position of understanding enabled her to directly support another child.

### **Tidy up time**

Orla's school experience was slightly different to the other children guiding the study. A continuous provision approach was employed in her school in Year 1, which continued the type of provision found in Reception that echoes early childhood pedagogy such as Montessori (2004), encouraging practitioners to facilitate child-led learning. Fieldnotes reveal:

*Various workstations encourage children to explore different areas, for example an area for building and designing which has axels, hand saws and a glue gun for making a moon buggy. Other sections of the room offer opportunities for arts and crafts, drawing, the dollhouse, the moon and planets, marble runs, and everywhere features options for children to draw and write. Doors are open for children to access outside where there is a mud kitchen, potion making, sand pit, clay, upturned milk crates, chairs, steering wheels, a new bridge, pretend bricks and plants (Researcher fieldnotes).*

With access to equipment and resources that were accessible to all the children, this child-centred pedagogy invited children to take responsibility to direct their own learning (Bryce-Clegg, 2015). This pedagogy recognises the importance of children having autonomy over their own learning priorities and pace, whilst staff act as facilitators and guides. Although children spent most of their time encouraged to make choices about what they would like to do and when, there were inevitably times where this ended, and the class teacher required children to finish their activity. One of these 'tidy up' times occurred whilst Orla was at a table:

*The teacher called that it was 'Tidy up Time' and the children began picking up objects from the floor, or clearing the tables. Orla empties an entire pencil pot onto the table and spends the whole of Tidy up Time slowing putting each object back in the same pot (Researcher fieldnotes).*

One interpretation of this observation could be that by emptying the pot of pencils and tidying them one at a time, Orla mirrored the actions of others without necessarily understanding the purpose of tidying up. Although this could enable Orla to join in a class activity by putting things into containers, it does not necessarily foster a sense of belonging among the class as they work together towards the common goal of tidying the room. On the other hand, Orla might have known she had to tidy up something, and wanted to control the tidying to the area she was already in, so took responsibility for the pot immediately in front of her. Although it shows Orla following the rules of tidying up, it also raises some questions as to how Orla experiences this type of horizontal transition which signified the end of one activity and the start of another (González-Moreira, Ferreira & Vidal, 2021).

Interestingly, this period of time would be one of the few adult-directed activities that children had to complete rather than their own choice of when to stop an activity and move on to the next. Izumi-Taylor and Lin's (2017) interviews suggested 'Tidy up time' was considered a chore, separate from play. This could also emphasise the difference between children's self-directed activities and tasks chosen and directed by the adults in the class. Implementing more child-centred pedagogies can enable children to learn at their own pace (Georgeson *et al*, 2018; Clark, 2022) and encourage agency as children participate in making choices.

### **"It's my turn to talk"**

Another significant part of children's experiences of education was learning the rules to becoming a part of the school community. Children learnt not to talk when the class teacher is talking, which highlighted some challenges for both children and staff, as the following observation in Orla's class indicates:

*Orla is stood directly in front of Ms Roberts [class teacher] looking up at her, and she starts talking at Ms Roberts whilst she is talking to the whole class. Ms Roberts says, "it's my turn to talk" and continues giving the whole class instruction. Orla continues to talk to Ms Roberts. Ms Roberts repeats "my turn to talk" two or three more times before Orla moves away (Researcher fieldnotes).*

Learning to understand classroom rules such as waiting for the class teacher to finish talking before starting a conversation, could help to lay the foundation for important social communication skills such as turn-taking and listening. Interestingly, the children in the study had significantly more opportunities than their peers to share their thoughts with staff because of their increased 1:1 contact time with a teaching assistant. However, opportunities to share their thoughts would not necessarily arise without structuring or prompts, due to children's difficulty understanding and managing social communication (Gulliver, 2023). Therefore, it is important for schools to consider opportunities for children to learn when they can "talk", share their views and thoughts, in order to learn when to self-advocate. Opportunities to practice sharing their views are particularly needed to enable children's meaningful participation in reviewing their EHCP (Sharma, 2021).

Ryan shared an activity known as the 'Bucket game' which aimed to build children's concentration and attention skills. The intervention specifically supports children with developmental disabilities to

increase their attention skills and regulate behaviour (Buckingham, 2012) by developing skills to focus their thinking and build resilience. The following observation describes:

*We are in a small room with a teaching assistant and a group of 5 children each sat on their chairs. The teaching assistant talks through what is happening: there are three stages, and she draws a symbol for each stage on the white board. First, bucket time. Then, bubbles. Then, roll in the blanket. After each stage, the teaching assistant crosses it off. The first stage is bucket time, where she takes out a very noisy, spinning, flashing sensory toy and shows to the children for a while, before putting it away and bringing out the next toy, a dancing robot. This is building their time focussing and concentrating, and turn taking, as the children are monitored for how much they seem to engage and focus on the toy (Researcher fieldnotes).*

Building attention is also reflected in the EYFS Early learning Goals (DfE, 2021) which encourages children to learn self-regulation, manage self and build relationships. By developing executive skills, children can begin to develop their ability to self-regulate. A challenge here is the explicit instructions for children to follow to become a member of the class can lessen their opportunities for practising self-advocacy. Therefore, children are required to learn the right time and place to share their views, which itself competes with developing agency and making choices.

### **The friendly hand-dryer**

For Wendy, an important part of her experience of education was managing her complex relationship with sound which she identified through the hand dryer located in the girls' toilets. On her guided tour, Wendy excitedly took a photograph of the hand dryer and introduced the researcher to "the friendly hand dryer" which she referred to several times throughout the researchers' visit [Figure 2].

*Insert figure 2: image of the hand dryer (copyright with authors)*

Whilst next to the hand dryer, Wendy looked visibly worried and frightened, and clearly did not want to use it. Further observations revealed that the teaching assistant working closely with Wendy would often talk her through each stage of washing hands, approaching the hand dryer, and explain how it will turn on when her hands were underneath, and turn off when she moves her hands away. Over the week, fieldnotes show Wendy engaging in frequent conversations with others about the hand dryer:

*Wendy talks a lot about the hand dryer, and when standing outside the bathroom in the hallway, Wendy asks another child in her class as he walks past; "do you use the hand dryer?" to which the child looks confused and does not reply... [after repeating the question] The child then smiles, puzzled, "yes!" and walks on (Researcher fieldnotes).*

Transcripts of the photograph activity also indicate Wendy's eagerness to see the photo of the hand dryer she had taken on the tour. When asked for her favourite photograph, Wendy replied "I'm going to see the hand dryer one," smiling at the photograph.

*Wendy: Yeah. And this is where the hand dryer is!*

*Researcher: Yeah. So these are all the photos you took of your school*

*Wendy: That's when I... Ms Dot [teaching assistant] used the hand dryer.*

*Researcher: We could keep these photos, and maybe Ms Dot can work with you with them*

*Wendy: Yeah. Ooh. There's the hand dryer! (Audio transcription)*

The researcher reflected with school staff about the significance of the hand dryer for Wendy, which revealed differences in perspectives for staff who thought “she may outgrow it” (Class teacher, Year 1). Part of managing a developmental disability can include negotiating high oversensitivity to daily environmental sounds (Gothelf *et al.* 2006). The teaching assistant recognised Wendy’s fascination and concern with using the hand dryer and was eager to support Wendy to manage this aspect of her school life through making a social story using the photograph Wendy had taken. Whilst previous research has found working with teaching assistants can prevent children from learning independence or engaging with qualified teachers (Blatchford and Webster, 2015), this study suggests teaching assistants had a positive impact on understanding the children’s needs, preferences and priorities. The nuanced, subtle and complex way Wendy communicates about managing her sound sensitivities raises important questions of how practitioners can help support this approach-avoidance conflict (Spielberger and Starr, 2012) by distinguishing between genuine interest with a specific object, or a need to self-calm because of the anxiety and discomfort when exploring the object. More widely, many children with disabilities may require more support to help manage an anxiety or sound sensitivity, curiosity and self-regulation skills which may rely on staff knowledge and understanding of the disability and the way children share their anxiety (Gulliver, 2023).

## **Conclusion**

This paper highlights a methodology that provides rich, insightful data from a population that is usually excluded from research (Nind, Flewitt & Payler, 2010). This study demonstrates an ethically sensitive, responsive approach to research, which recognises children with developmental disabilities as capable of participating in further research about them when given the appropriate tools and opportunities to share their ideas. This approach could be used in both further research and in practice for mainstream provision to consider opportunities for children with developmental disabilities to share their views. For example, children who have an EHCP should be actively involved in an annual review process which considers children’s own views and aspirations (DfE, 2015; Sharma, 2021). Therefore, employing similar approaches could help facilitate routes to self-advocacy for children with developmental disabilities to share their views on education.

Findings highlight the experiences of children as a primary school pupil which meant following the classroom rules and routines, such as transitioning from one activity to another, or waiting for the teacher to stop talking before they could talk. At times, children required support through prompts or accessed interventions to build attention and concentration skills to help them participate in the school. However, the paper also considered how following classroom instructions could limit possibilities for children with developmental disabilities to share their ideas and views, which could prevent opportunities for self-advocacy.

A key concern is that within the mainstream classroom, children are less able to go at their own paces. This is amplified amongst a school culture in England that focussed on improving education outcomes through closing achievement gaps for disadvantaged pupils (Wilkins, 2015; Ball, 2016) rather than focussing on quality of child-centred education. In contrast, child-centred pedagogies recognise children’s individual differences and require staff to prioritise children’s interests and preferences in order to enable them to pursue learning opportunities at their own paces (Georgeson *et al.* 2018). In contradiction to previous research (Blatchford and Webster, 2015), this study suggests teaching assistants play an important role in facilitating a child-centred approach that celebrates children’s own

learning priorities and accommodates working at their pace through a safe, secure supportive and non-pressured environment (Elkind, 1987). The challenge is whether this can occur within an environment that researchers have described as 'inflexible and uncomprehending' for children with disabilities who struggle to 'respond to the demands of mainstream schooling' (Vincent, Oliver and Pavlopoulou, 2023).

Through guiding the research, children also revealed objects of importance including navigating spaces with daily environmental sounds that cause discomfort and anxiety (Gothelf *et al.* 2006). Wendy's fascination with the 'friendly hand dryer' offered an example of the complex and subtle ways that children with a developmental disability may share their views and ask for support in managing self-regulation and anxiety. A limitation of the study was the time restrictions preventing the researcher from following up with the children as they received photobooks detailing their individual research. This could have revealed further opportunities for the children to disseminate their views of education to peers, school staff and other professionals interested in children's own experiences.

Children shared their experiences of vertical and horizontal transitions (González-Moreira, Ferreira & Vidal, 2021) as an important part of their school. This supports previous research raising transitions as challenging for children with developmental disabilities (Palikara, Ashworth & Van Herwegen, 2018) and indicates that children require support in understanding the change between one class to the next class. Transitions from one activity to another was also highlighted in the school using a continuous provision approach. The early childhood pedagogies employed in Orla's school allowed children more agency in choosing their own activities, but teacher-directed instruction was still needed for Orla and the rest of the class to tidy-up.

The methods chosen included children's own experiences of education which could be used as insights to reflect on wider instances of inclusion for children with other disabilities and differences. The mainstream education system in England raises troubling questions over the quality of experience for children with disabilities. The social structures in place that define age level expectations may continue to perpetuate inequalities against children whose developmental disabilities will position them as 'atypical'. For a fair, equitable education, children with disabilities require relational, quality support that listens to their nuanced views and values their experiences.

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