Participation in Education

Summary of findings from research on the involvement of children with little or no verbal communication

Background

The Participation in Education (PIE) project is a two-year (2005-2007) research project carried out by academics in two departments at the University of Bristol. It is funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. The aim of the project is to address the exclusion of disabled children with little or no verbal communication from decision-making processes in education. This report is based on the findings from the first phase of the research, a national (England) survey of schools.

The questionnaire was sent to all relevant schools in England. Respondents were asked for information about the numbers of children involved, what strategies are currently used to involve them in their Annual Reviews, Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and target setting, as well as wider decision-making within school and ideas for future improvements. 112 responding schools were included in the study, representing 46% of all Local Education Authorities in England.

Most respondents to the questionnaire were either Head Teachers or Deputy Head Teachers. Just over half the schools were special schools catering for children with a range of impairments, 28 were either mainstream schools or units within mainstream schools, and the remaining schools were special schools that catered for specific groups of disabled children. On average, there were 14 children with little or no verbal communication in each school, but the range was between 0-5 and over 50, with 59% of schools having fewer than 15 children. 93% of children had learning difficulties, and 40% had physical impairments. In almost all cases (98%) children with physical impairments were also reported to have a learning difficulty.

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Strategies, equipment and ICT

Almost all schools (96%) reported that they used a range of strategies, equipment or ICT to support children with little or no verbal communication. These have been categorised into: signing, symbols, equipment, programmes, strategies, software programmes and low tech equipment. Detailed lists of these items can be found in the full report. Makaton and Signalong were the most often used signing systems, and there was a wide range of symbol strategies cited, including the commonly used Rebus symbols developed by Widget. The group of communication aids known as VOCAs (Voice Output Communication Aids) was very wide, with BIGMacks, Dynavox , 4Talk4, Tech Talk8 and Tech/Speak32 being the most frequently mentioned. There was also a wide range of computer related equipment used, including switches and specialist keyboards and joysticks. A varied and creative range of strategies was used, especially within the classroom at an individual level, including the use of Passports, cued articulation, specific positioning and visual timetables. Clicker 4/5, Writing with Symbols and Boardmaker were the most commonly used software programmes.

Involvement of children with little or no verbal communication

Half of the schools (50%) indicated that the children with little or no verbal communication were involved in decision making at school, with a further 36% sometimes being involved. 14% of schools said that the children were not involved, with several of these indicating

that either the children were too young, or too profoundly disabled, or that they were hoping to improve on this in the near future.

53% of schools reported that children with little or no verbal communication were involved with their Individual Education Plans (IEPs), but over a third of these qualified this by indicating that the children were involved where appropriate, or if they were able to contribute meaningfully. There was a clear indication that many schools wanted to improve their practice in this area.

The ways in which children were involved varied widely, from the use of 'child friendly target sheets' to choice being given to the child about which targets they wanted to achieve. 51% of schools indicated that children were involved in their Annual Reviews. Again, a range of ways of involving children with little or no verbal communication was indicated, from the use of video, symbol supported discussion, the development of Visual Annual Reviews, to simply making sure that the child was aware that the review was happening.

For almost half of the schools (41%), the involvement of children in decisions about secondary school was not appropriate as their schools catered for children up to the age of 18 or 19. Of the remaining schools, 16% did involve the children in this process in a number of ways, from a planned programme of visits with recording of reactions, to providing support to parents. Other ways in which schools involved children with little or no verbal communication largely involved the use of School Councils or Forums, but

many other ways such as choosing trips out, interviewing staff and being involved in complaints processes were also mentioned.

A high number, 53% of respondents, stated that children 'sometimes' attended meetings, with a relatively low number either always (4%) or mostly (16%) attending. When asked in what ways the children were supported in these meetings to ensure that their views were taken into account, the majority of respondents mentioned the use of staff, especially those who knew the child very well. Parents were also key to this, as well as the use of signing, symbols and Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) generally. About a third of respondents indicated that the children's views were formally recorded in meetings, but only 10% reported that the children's views were always recorded in an accessible way.

Difficulties and solutions around involving children with little or no verbal communication

The respondents were asked about situations in which it is more difficult to involve children with little or no verbal communication. This provoked a wide range of responses, the most frequent of which referred to difficulties in involving these children in discussions and Circle Time activities. The next most frequent response was that it was difficult to involve children with little or no verbal communication where abstract or complex decisions or choices needed to be made. The respondents were asked what situations would make wider involvement of the children with limited

verbal communication possible. The two most common, but perhaps unsurprising, answers to this were that one-to-one support was necessary and adequate time for preparation was vital. Some schools also mentioned, for example, that better communication between schools would be helpful, as would the increased use of advocates.

Training

Nearly half (41%) of all the respondents had not been involved in any training about strategies to involve children with little or no verbal communication in their education. A significant number of respondents indicated that they would like to see improvements in this area. Several respondents had been involved in training about the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), in-house training and training in the use of Makaton.

Protocols and guidelines

Schools were asked whether or not they used or were aware of any national, local or school protocols or guidelines on involving children with little or no verbal communication in decision-making. A third of schools were not aware of any protocols or guidelines, 15% of schools were able to name at least one national resource, 10% named local resources and 15% of schools had their own policies or guidelines. These responses indicate very low levels of awareness and availability of relevant protocols and guidance. No resource was mentioned more than five times, and this related to generic 'inclusive school policies', suggesting a lack of consistency across England in this respect.

Advocates

The schools were asked about their use of independent advocates with children with little or no verbal communication. Half of the schools said that they did use advocates with these children. However, when asked to give details, almost half (43%) said that the advocate was the child's teaching assistant, support staff member or teacher, therefore not truly independent. A further 7% said that the child's parent or carer acted as an advocate, which again suggests someone who is not independent. Three schools mentioned the use of advocates when working with Looked After Children, another school mentioned the involvement of an advocate during a police investigation, and another used an advocate to support a parent in the Annual review.

Current approaches and improvements
The schools were asked to state how well they thought they were doing in relation to their current approaches to involving children with little or no verbal communication. It is encouraging to see that 69% of schools thought that they were either doing well or quite well, with a further 7% doing very well. However, this leaves 24% of schools feeling that they were either not doing well, but that they were improving, or just not doing well.

The schools were then asked what improvements they would like to see in strategies to involve children with little or no verbal communication. The responses showed a clear need for improvements in training. Other improvements included the desire for more opportunities and time for involving the children in decision-making, to develop awareness and skills around choices and the use and delivery of ICT, AAC and communication aids.

Conclusion

It is clear from the results of this survey that a wide variety of often innovative and creative methods is being employed to involve with children with little or no verbal communication in their education. However, it is also apparent that there are few consistent guidelines or protocols to support staff in this work and few opportunities for sharing practice. The relatively low levels of involvement of children with little or no verbal communication in meetings that concern them have been of note, and are indicative of the need for more consistency. Involving children with little or no verbal communication is a problematic area for many schools and we believe that a need for further research and training has been demonstrated. With an average of 14 children with little or no verbal communication in each of the schools that have responded to this survey, the numbers of children across England are clearly significant, and with an increasing awareness of children's rights, this is an area that deserves serious attention.

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