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The power of ‘research conversations’ in analysing and interpreting the views and perspectives of children identified with SEND

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Abstract

The use of multi-sensory data collection tools with children in special and inclusive education is increasing in popularity. Many studies in this area have highlighted the potential for photography, drawings and other visual data collection methods to capture children's perspectives on inclusive practice. However, these tools are likely to be less successful in generating accurate findings if the data arising from them are not effectively interpreted by the researcher. There is a need to highlight appropriate ways to involve child participants as collaborators throughout the research process, with the aim of better accessing the understandings contained in multi-sensory data collected from children as participants. This paper presents and explores the findings from an empirical participatory study, piloting a multi-sensory research approach involving children identified with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND) in an English primary school. ‘Research conversations’ were found to be a highly appropriate way of ensuring that important multi-perspective understandings contained in visual forms of data are better accessed by the researcher, highlighting the importance of involving child participants as collaborators in an iterative analysis process.

KEYWORDS

children, collaboration, inclusion, multi-sensory methods, participatory research, pupil voice, qualitative data analysis, SEND, visual methodologies

Key points

- Involving children as participants in educational research is ever increasing in popularity, yet ‘traditional’ data collection methods often present barriers to effective involvement, frequently due to communication differences that children identified with SEND may present.
- This research highlights an innovative approach to involving children as collaborators in research aimed at accessing their perspectives, with a particular focus on reducing the power differential between researcher and participant.
- It presents a scaffolded, multi-sensory data collection approach, reducing the emphasis on written communication skills. The aim was to enable children to exercise autonomy over the research, supporting higher quality meaning making and authentic interpretation of children's views during the analysis phase.
- The findings indicated that the scaffolded approach and the ‘research conversations’ that took place between the researchers and participants were highly successful in providing iterative opportunities for collaborative analysis of data, accessing deeper multi-perspective understandings in relation to children's experiences and mitigating some common communication barriers.

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INTRODUCTION

Most researchers in the field of special and inclusive education are now advocates of conducting research *with* children, rather than undertaking research *about* children, a shift that is relatively recent in the world of educational research (Schiller & Einarsdottir, 2009). Yet, this collaborative approach often has an endpoint; many researchers endeavour to involve children in the collection of data but conduct the data analysis process independently, without involvement of the child participants (Alderson, 2001; Clark, 2017). This approach remains particularly prevalent when the child participants are identified with a Special Educational Need and/or Disability (SEND). It is widely acknowledged that involving children identified with SEND in the research process can be challenging, often due to the range of communication skills that children identified with SEND possess (Edwards & Bunn, 2022). However, it is arguably more important to involve these children throughout the research process, up to and including the analysis phase, due to the specific challenges with interpreting and meaning-making that researchers may have with data collected from these participants (*ibid*). Many researchers advocate the use of multi-sensory methods, often image-based, to support data collection in research across special and inclusive education. Yet, involving the participants in exploring the multi-perspective meanings held within the multi-sensory data themselves is relatively rare. It also lacks an accepted theoretical underpinning, informed by a common epistemological perspective that champions collaboration between child participant and adult researcher (Montreuil et al., 2021).

This paper shares the findings from an empirical study involving six children identified with a range of SEND needs in a mainstream primary school in England. The aim of the study was to pilot a structured approach to involving child participants throughout the research process, exploring whether or not the approach supported meaningful multi-perspective interpretation of the data generated through the data collection phase and analysis. This paper argues for the involvement of children past data gathering and into the analysis process; it introduces the importance of the ‘research conversation’ in supporting collaboration between researcher and participants into the analysis phase.

BACKGROUND

Children identified with SEND as research participants

The involvement of children identified with SEND in educational research is ever increasing, and their ability to participate meaningfully in the research process

is now largely recognised within research communities (Shaw, 2021). Yet, there is still hesitation about *how* to effectively involve children in the research process; most children identified with SEND present with additional or alternative communication requirements which can make traditional methodologies and data collection approaches less suitable. Additionally, many researchers struggle to identify ways to meaningfully access the perspectives behind the data gathered, due to the prevailing focus on ‘difference’ and ‘other’ that is often still engendered when considering involving children identified with SEND. Determining not only *how*, but *how far* to include children with SEND in research exploring their perspectives can have a significant impact upon the quality and credibility of findings generated (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010; Montreuil et al., 2021).

The way in which the individual researcher views the capabilities of children identified with SEND will affect the level of participation that they deem appropriate for their research. This paper argues for the involvement of children beyond the data collection phase of research and deeper into the data analysis process, suggesting that only through involving participants in latter stages of research can we expect to access the perspectives held within the data gathered. To ground this perspective within an epistemological framework, it is useful to reflect upon Punch's (2002) work on the nature of childhood. Historically, two major perspectives on the nature of childhood existed: that children are essentially indistinguishable from adults (Morrow & Richards, 1996) and that children are entirely different from adults (Hill, 1997). These perspectives resulted in a reluctance to involve children in research altogether and, when they were involved, there was a distinct inflexibility in research methodologies. Punch (2002) introduced a third perspective on the nature of childhood, that of viewing children as similar in nature to adults but possessing different competencies. This viewpoint is especially relevant when we translate it to children identified with SEND; it requires researchers to design methods that allow exploration of the phenomenon of interest through children's varied competencies. The growing popularity of this perspective amongst the research community has led to the emergence of a plethora of innovative multi-sensory research methods, for use in special and inclusive educational research (which are explored further in the subsequent section) (Coyne & Carter, 2018).

Yet, although data collection methods have arguably become more inclusive in design, there is still a widely acknowledged lack of consistency in perspective with regard to the theoretical underpinnings of involving children in research (Punch & Tisdall, 2012). To extend the work of Punch with the aim of developing a common theory of research in special and inclusive education, acknowledgement of children's varying competencies mean that they could be viewed as social actors and ‘holders of rights’ rather than undertaking roles linked to passivity

and dependency (ibid). Coyne and Carter (2018) stress that being researcher committed to participation of children means ‘a fundamental commitment to believing that children and young people can and will shape your research, construct and challenge your ideas and bring their own ideas and agendas to the table’ (p.171). This means, in essence, supporting the social model of disability via having a commitment to overcoming the current/common inadequacies of data collection tools in involving children identified with SEND as true collaborators in research. It is useful, here, to draw upon the work of Klocker (2007) to who introduced the notion of ‘thickness’ and ‘thinness’ with regard to children’s agency:

Thin agency refers to decisions and everyday actions that are carried out within highly restrictive contexts, characterized by few viable alternatives. ‘Thick’ agency is having the latitude to act within a broad range of options. It is possible for a person’s agency to be ‘thickened’ or ‘thinned’ over time and space, and across their various relationships. Structures, contexts and relationships can act as ‘thinners’ or ‘thickeners’ of individual’s agency, by constraining or expanding their range of viable choices.

(p. 85)

To extrapolate this concept to educational research specifically, it is possible to highlight the collaboration potential of children in research as ‘thick’ when it comes to their local and immediate learning environments that is, schools/educational environments and ‘thin’ when we consider their abilities to influence the macro level of educational policy. Conversely, it could be argued that the agency of the adult researcher is ‘thicker’ in relation to the macro level, due to the greater power that the adult researcher naturally possesses (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015). This is particularly relevant when we consider research in the field of special and inclusive education, where child participants identified with SEND often present with differing communication needs that can be barriers to their effective participation. Thus, there is significant potential to join up the abilities of children to influence research and practice at the meso level of the system with that of the adult in the macro level of the system. Therefore, effective collaboration between child and adult researcher throughout the research process should focus on supporting children to participate in the meso structure of their own educational experiences and enable researchers to extrapolate the multi-perspective findings gained from meso-level research (where appropriate) to the macro level in influencing wider school policies/practices. This concept serves as an epistemological framework for research in the study reported on in this paper.

The development of multi-sensory data collection methods

Over the past 20 years or so, the range of multi-sensory data collection methods for use in research involving children identified with SEND has seen significant development (Coyne & Carter, 2018; Jones, 2004). These methods have included the use of photography, diary entries, drawings, sentence completion activities, comic strips, child-led tours and radio workshops (Tay-Lim & Lim, 2013). Many of these methods have an emphasis on avoiding an over-reliance on the written word, due to a higher likelihood of challenges with reading/writing that children identified with SEND may present (Shaw, 2021). These methods also tend to move away from traditional classroom learning environments and more towards exploring concepts through different spaces and mediums. When research takes place in school environments, researchers have endeavoured to avoid desk-based work in classroom spaces and have moved more towards an exploration of the whole school environment, such as through transect walks, child-led tours or photography of school spaces. The rationale behind this approach is to engender a sense of freedom and confidence within the children; they are better able to utilise the places that they feel most comfortable in, often resulting in higher quality data than if the child was asked to undertake a task in a place they felt less able to freely express themselves (Clark & Moss, 2011).

A defining feature of most multi-sensory methods is the shift in power differential between the researcher and the child participant (Coad & Evans, 2008; Moore & Sixsmith, 2000). Children are often given a degree of autonomy over the data collection process, from being allowed to take charge of a camera to leading the direction of the transect walk. This notion of children as collaborators rather than simply as participants in research requires a fundamental shift in the way we view the traditional researcher; researchers must be willing to relinquish some of the power in the relationship (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015). This can be particularly challenging within the field of education, due to the hierarchical structure of the system, characterised by a historical power imbalance between teacher and student. Yet, evidence suggests that the reliability and validity of research improves when we encourage children to take on a collaborative role within research (ibid). However, as discussed previously, this collaborative role remains tentative across most research in special and inclusive education. There are examples of co-constructed research, for example the co-researcher collective in the *Living Life to the Fullest* project (Liddiard et al., 2022). However, these projects have tended to focus on disabled young people, rather than younger children with cognitive SEND needs. Finding appropriate ways to involve children identified with a range of SEND-related needs throughout the research process, with a particular focus

on the less explored ‘collaborative analysis phase’, was the focus of this research.

INTRODUCING SCAFFOLDED ‘RESEARCH CONVERSATIONS’: A CASE STUDY

This paper is informed by an empirical study, employing a singular case study methodological approach within one mainstream primary school in the North East of England, involving a total of six children identified with SEND. The study was funded by the University of Sunderland's research fund. Initial interest in this area was sparked as a result of the lead researcher's role as a PhD/MA thesis supervisor in special and inclusive education, as well as in her wider teaching of research methods in Education. It was identified that increasing numbers of students were motivated by involving children identified with a range of SEND needs as participants in their proposed studies, yet the traditional data collection methods in education lacked relevance/validity when translated to their participants or contexts of interest. The rigidity of the semi-structured interview, observation or questionnaire provided minimal scope for students to involve participants with differing communication needs in their research. The research reported on in this paper aimed to trial a specific approach to ‘filling this gap’ across research in special and inclusive education.

METHODOLOGY

Researcher positioning

The core epistemological underpinning of this study is that of post-positivism, more specifically social constructivism, characterised by meaning-making being shaped by the social context in which a person is positioned (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). Thus, methodology that involves social interaction was integral to the design of this study. Indeed, one of the central foci within this piece of research was on determining effective ways to support good communication between adults and children identified with various special educational needs. Therefore, social constructivism aligns clearly with the aims of the research itself. Regarding the skills and experience of the research team, all three researchers have spent extensive time working with children in primary school contexts, two as teacher/researchers and one solely as a researcher. This was deemed important so that the research team had experience in both building and sustaining effective communication and professional relationships with children of the age range involved in this study. Two of the research team are also qualified primary school teachers.

This provided the research team with both challenges and benefits when it came to data analysis, which are highlighted in the results and discussion section.

The epistemology of research followed in this study reflects that discussed earlier in relation to the aim of supporting children with exerting influence over the meso structure of their own educational experiences and enabling researchers to extrapolate these child-informed understandings (where appropriate) to the macro level in influencing wider school policy. This was implemented via a research design which involved collaboration between adult researcher and childhood participant throughout both the data gathering and initial data analysis phases of the research. Greater detail on this is given in the subsequent section.

Research aims

There were two key aims to this research:

1. To highlight approaches to involving children identified with SEND as collaborators throughout the research process.
2. To explore the appropriateness of a specific multi-sensory methodology in undertaking meaningful, multi-perspective analysis of participant-informed data.

The specific focus on the analysis phase of the research was chosen as the literature indicates that this is a phase in which there is a lack of focus in prior studies exploring effective participation of children with SEND (Coad & Evans, 2008; Jones, 2004). The scaffolded approach to data collection was deemed important as prior research has highlighted that there is a delicate balance to be found between prescriptive and formulaic data collection, to support relevance and validity, and data collection that affords participants a degree of autonomy to promote engagement and higher quality data (Clark, 2017). The term ‘research conversation’ is introduced as a specific approach to determine the efficacy of, in relation to the analysis phase of the research. This will be explored further in the following sub-section.

It is important to note that the focus of this research was on ascertaining whether the methodology that the researchers employed was effective in involving children as collaborators in research and could allow meaningful access to and interpretation of their perspectives. Therefore, the perspectives that came out of the research are not the focus; they require analysing in order to explore how well the research aims were met, but the perspectives that were sought (children's experiences of school) will only be reported on with relevance to the aims of the study, rather than as an area of intrinsic interest in themselves.

Methodological approach

A single case study design was deemed by the researchers to be most appropriate in meeting the aims of this piece of research articulated above (Yin, 2018). This fits with the epistemological underpinnings of the researchers, as well as the research aims, as it supports contextual, in depth meaning making with regard to the topic of interest. To enable collaboration within the research process, a three-phased approach to data collection was designed, working with six year 6 children at a mainstream primary school in Sunderland to elicit their perceptions of school. An outline of this approach is given below, with expansion on the literature underpinning these methods explored subsequently.

Day 1: Child-led tours

Each child was asked separately to take a researcher on a tour of the school. They were given an iPad with a camera function and asked to take photographs of people and places that were important to them, either in a positive or negative way, through the tour. Children retained autonomy over the direction of the tour and the researcher acted a facilitator through the method, asking questions to prompt further clarification/discussion and to move the tour on, where deemed appropriate.

Day 2: Creating ‘special stories’ with the children

Children were asked to create a special story explaining their experiences/thoughts on school, using software that was kindly provided by Special IApps using the photographs that they took on the child-led tours the previous day. This allowed for each child to create a digital story book, with photographs they had taken on the child-led tour, one per page. Children could choose to caption the photograph with text (either typed by them or the researcher) or use the voice recorder function to share information on each photograph.

Day 3: Initial analysis activity: Sharing ‘special stories’ via research conversations

Children were asked to work with a different researcher on this day and were asked to share their special stories via a ‘research conversation’. Researchers asked basic prompting questions through the conversation, where necessary, to support children in sharing further relevant information about their stories. Yet, children retained autonomy over the focus of the conversation throughout. This method allowed the researchers to sense-check their understandings with regard to children’s perceptions

of school and supported the researchers with accessing multi-perspective understandings in relation to the child-informed data.

Background to the data collection methods

The child-led tours that were employed are heavily linked to ‘transect walks’, which have been utilised across various studies involving children in prior research (Clark & Moss, 2011). The often-highlighted benefit of this method is in redressing the frequent power imbalance between adult researcher and more vulnerable child participant (Van der Riet & Boettiger, 2009). It was important that children were given the autonomy to lead the researcher through the school at their own pace and with regard to where was visited. Each researcher was given a ‘prompt sheet’ with questions to ask the child in supporting the tour to continue if the child was deemed to be struggling with decision-making, and to support useful/relevant conversation on the tour, where helpful. Questions such as ‘why have you decided to show me this space?’ or ‘Is this a space that is important to you? Why?’ were asked where deemed appropriate.

The photography element of the child-led tours was included to provide a useful focus for children who struggled with verbal communication on the tour and as a way of collecting an additional layer of data on children’s experiences of school, supporting the research aims (Hill et al., 2016). This was also intended to enhance the role of the child in this research; autonomy over the camera was important in empowering children as collaborators within the research process (Luijckx et al., 2016). The use of photography in research aiming to elicit pupil perspectives is growing in popularity, especially when involving children identified with SEND. Photography has been found to encourage participants to lead the discussion, rather than passively answering questions, which further supports a collaborative approach. Photography has also been found to support in depth participant description, providing greater opportunities to access deeper researcher-understandings of the subject matter (Feng, 2019).

Special stories were employed as both a data collection tool and an initial analysis approach; supporting children to explore their photographs within the active research phase, talk around them and choose a handful to include in their stories supported children to engage in initial reflection on the importance of the depictions in their photographs. The stories were intended to serve as a motivating factor for many of the children; a concrete output was likely to make sense to the children in a school context and could further support their engagement with the research process (Einarsdottir, 2005). The researchers aimed to act as facilitators during the sharing of the stories, enabling the children to exert a level of control over the

direction of the 'research conversation'. The conversations that were held while children shared their stories were intended to allow the researchers to be critically reflective of their adult perspectives on children's experiences (Abma & Schrijver, 2020). This was deemed useful in terms of 'sense checking' adult-informed understandings, enabling multi-perspective analysis of the data and ensuring that children were supported to participate through different phases of the research process, into the initial analysis phase.

Data analysis approach

As a focus of this research was on the data analysis phase, it was important that opportunities were provided for children to collaborate in analysis of the data emerging from this study. Data were analysed both during Day 3 of the research in school phase (involving both adult researchers and child participants) and by the three researchers during an in-depth 'analysis day' post the active research phase. Research conversation transcripts and the special stories that the children produced were iteratively analysed via a combination of the constant comparative approach to analysing qualitative data and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Boden et al., 2019).

The foundations of an IPA approach situate the participant as the expert of their own experience, with the researcher acting as 'facilitator' in enabling these experiences to be shared (MacLeod, 2019). This is a difficult approach to implement, especially when we consider the child identified with SEND/teacher-researcher power imbalance. In this study, the researchers continually reflected upon their role and aimed to achieve an 'empathetic interpretation' of children's experiences (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008, p.29). They did this by continually sense-checking understandings, asking prompting and clarification questions to scaffold and layer understandings, as well as ensuring that the language used in the special stories reflected that used by the children themselves. This supported authentic recording, therefore more accurate analysis of children's perspectives. In this case, the 'insider' perspective of the researchers did not undermine participants' sense-making of their experiences, but rather placed them in a different context (MacLeod, 2019).

Ethical considerations

Informed consent was sought from the Headteacher of the school as safeguarding lead and gatekeeper of the children. Consent was also sought from parents of the school, via information letter and signed permission slips. Finally, children's consent was sought before the research commenced and before each data collection session, to ensure that children were always happy to

continue to work with the researchers throughout the entire research process (BERA, 2018). Before conducting a data collection session with each sampled child, the study was briefly re-explained to the child by the researcher and participation was explained to be voluntary. Children were asked to give their verbal and written consent before any research was conducted; they were asked to tick or point to an image of a smiley face if they were happy to take part, or a sad face if they were unwilling to take part. Data were shared in password protected files on the researchers' laptops, which were kept locked outside of active research time. Children were given pseudonyms and all data that could be used to identify children were altered in the write up to safeguard anonymisation. Photographs that included children's faces were removed in any saved/printed documents, unless they were of the children participating in the research since consent had been sought from their parents.

Background to the participating children

It is important to note that the students taking part in this study had been placed in a mainstream school, and as such were likely to have Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND) that might be considered less complex or severe than students with SEND in a special school. All children were able to communicate verbally (albeit at different ability levels), had the fine motor skills to operate an iPad and were physically mobile; these were assumed characteristics when sampling according to the methodological design. As such, the methodology reported in this study is not intended to be suitable for children with more severe SEND-related needs, such as those who are non-verbal/non-mobile or who present with profound and multiple learning disabilities. There is more work to be done to better support the participation of children presenting with more severe and complex SEND needs in educational research; however this is not the focus of the research reported on in this paper. Table 1 has been developed to give a sense of the SEND-related characteristics of each participating child, relevant for contextualising the subsequent presentation and discussion of findings. The information informing the table was provided by Teachers, TAs and the 'about me' section of students' SEND review meeting documentation. Note the use of 'anticipated communication barriers' as children themselves did not share all of the information given, therefore it was viewed with caution by the research team.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the data highlighted four key themes in the findings, which are used to scaffold this discussion.

TABLE 1 Characteristics of participating children.

| Name of Year 6 child (pseudonym) | SEND-related diagnoses/characteristics | Anticipated communication barriers |
|----------------------------------|--|--|
| John | Primary need relating to SEMH; diagnosed with a developmental coordination disorder; currently undergoing an assessment for ASD | May struggle with walking on the child-led tour as may tire easily |
| Millie | Has an EHCP with a primary need related to Cognition & Learning; EHCP been in place for one term; has physical and sensory (visual) needs. Has a physical age of 5 due to a genetic condition that affects tightening of muscles in her legs. Working at Year 1/2 age in all areas of the curriculum | May struggle with walking on the child-led tour as may tire easily Unlikely to want to type captions to special story images due to challenges with fine motor skills. |
| Sophie | Primary need relating to Cognition & Learning; working approximately 2/3 years behind expected levels in all areas of the curriculum; often appears withdrawn in lessons | May not feel comfortable talking to the researchers as she is not a confident verbal communicator, especially on the child-led tours and when sharing her special story |
| Jack | Has an EHCP for Cognition & Learning; diagnosed with ASD and ADHD and is medicated for the latter. Struggles with empathy in building relationships and showing traits of dyslexia | May not want to engage with the tasks at all as struggles with building relationships with people he doesn't know. Does not enjoy writing so may need research to type captions in special story if he chooses to participate |
| Brad | Primary need relating to SEMH; can display aggressive behaviours to staff and other children; is effective at masking his social challenges | Tends to use physical behaviours to communicate so may struggle with communication when sitting in the classroom to complete the special story task |
| Amer | Has an EHCP; is diagnosed as profoundly deaf and uses a hearing loop in school; also diagnosed with Dyslexia and Dyspraxia. Is working 2 years below expected levels in Maths and English | Prefers communicating verbally rather than in written format so may struggle with creating the captions for her special story. May also take some time for her to familiarise herself with the pitch and tone of researchers' voices |

These are: participant autonomy and ownership; accessing multi-perspective understandings via an iterative analysis approach; gaining insight into children's experiences and breaking down communication barriers. These themes were decided upon by the research team after the intensive 'analysis day', informed by the collaborative initial analysis activity of sharing the special stories that the children produced on Day 3 of the active research phase.

Participant autonomy and ownership

When planning this research, the researchers hoped to support effective participant collaboration and engagement, primarily via enabling the participants to hold a degree of autonomy over the data collection and initial data analysis phases. Analysis of the data has indicated that this was successful. The children that were involved approached the research tasks on each day in diverse ways, reflecting their individual preferences, abilities and needs. This variability not only highlights the importance of recognising the heterogeneity within the mainstream SEND population, but also the importance of accommodating this variance by designing methodology that is flexible enough to offer children a method of conveying their views that suits their communication skills (Montreuil et al., 2021). An example of this variability in approach is shared as a vignette below:

Vignette: The child-led tours of Millie and Sophie

During the child-led tours on Day 1 of the research, Millie was a very vocal participant, electing to share high level of verbal detail regarding her feelings and experiences in each room that she went to with the researcher. Millie clearly felt comfortable with exerting autonomy over the direction of the tour, with the researcher asking very little in order to direct or facilitate the discussion. The tour with Millie lasted around 50 min, which highlights the high levels of engagement that she had with the task. Millie only took six photographs on the tour; however, preferring to share her thoughts verbally rather than visually. Sophie, on the other hand, elected to say very little about the spaces she visited with the researcher. Her tour lasted only 20 min and gave the researcher minimal appreciation of her experiences of school, allowing for only a basic understanding of whether the spaces were viewed positively or negatively by Sophie. However, the photography that accompanied the child-led tours was strongly embraced by Sophie; she chose to take 21 photographs. Sophie was very keen to both create and share her special story on Days 2 and 3 of the research, which gave the researchers additional opportunities to access her perspectives on school through prompts and questions.

The above example highlights the importance of both ensuring that multiple data collection approaches

are offered, to take account of varying communication skills of participants, and of researchers being unafraid to allow the participants to drive the direction of the research (Vincent & Benstead, 2022). Sophie's minimal verbal communication was anticipated by the researcher, as the research team had been told that Sophie was not a confident verbal communicator, especially with people she did not know well (see Table 1). Had the researchers continually encouraged Sophie to share her perspectives verbally, it is likely that she may have disengaged from child led tour and her participation could have ceased. Equally, had the researchers encouraged Millie to take more photographs and reduce her verbal communication on the tour, the richness of understandings gained through her verbal contributions may have been lost. Here, allowing each child to autonomously elect to share data via the medium that felt most comfortable to them is likely to have supported the collection of higher quality data (Clark & Moss, 2011).

Another interesting outcome was that all students verbalised an eagerness to receive a copy of their special story to take home/share with those who were important to them:

I can't wait to show my story to my big brother and my Auntie.

(Amer)

My Mam will be very proud of me for making this.

(John)

Can I take this out at playtime to show all my friends?

(Millie)

The use of the terms 'my story' and 'proud of me for making this' highlights a perceived sense of ownership of the data by the children involved. This is evidence that collaboration had occurred in the design and execution of this study, successfully empowering the children to participate, enhancing their sense of agency and validating their contributions. This is in alignment with underlying principles of participatory research, in particular collaboration and shared decision making with recognition of the participants being active agents in the research process (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2014).

Accessing multi-perspective understandings via an iterative analysis approach

Analysis of the data has suggested that not only did the scaffolded approach to data collection/analysis afford the researchers access to pupils' perspectives on school, but those understandings were also deepened by the multi-faceted nature of this approach. With all children involved, the researchers gathered data that enabled them to access deeper and multi-perspective understandings with each daily task, methodically and iteratively building up a more detailed picture of pupil experiences each day. Sharing of the special stories on Day 3 enabled many children to build upon the information they had

shared during the previous 2 days and support understandings related to the nuanced aspects of the children's lives including their learning preferences, social interactions, relationships and their holistic and lived experiences of home and school. An example of this is given in the vignette below.

Vignette: John's experience of the dinner hall

John elected to spend a significant proportion of his time on the child-led tour in the dinner hall, taking five photographs of the tables, chairs and staff members who worked in there. During the tour John was able to articulate that it was a place that he 'sometimes struggles with' but did not share further information on this, despite researcher prompting. On Day 2, John chose two photographs of the dinner hall to include in his special story one of which is depicted in Figure 1.

There was clearly a juxtaposition here between John's feeling that he 'sometimes struggles with this space' and the caption in his special story. John's research conversation on Day 3 revealed that food and his rituals around eating are an important factor in his ability to learn effectively; John shared verbally that he likes to sit in the same seat at lunch time, with the same students around him and will only eat the same two foods at school. If this does not happen, then John enters the period after lunch unable to engage with learning effectively. This insight is hugely helpful to school staff in supporting an effective teaching and learning environment for John and is unlikely to have been ascertained without involving John in the 'initial analysis' opportunity provided by the research conversation method undertaken in this research. This example



It's where I get my lunch. It is my favourite area in the school because it smells nice.

FIGURE 1 John's photograph.

supports the notion that where the children are actively engaged throughout different phases of the research process, their insights transcend surface level and provide the researcher with a more comprehensive overview of their experiences (Clark & Moss, 2011). For John, the iterative nature of the methodology followed in this study is likely to have contributed to deeper, multi-perspective understandings being built; John shared additional detail on his struggles with food/eating with each additional opportunity to participate.

Gaining insight into children's experiences

Linked to the above, the data indicated that the scaffolded, multi-sensory approach to data collection not only afforded in depth data gathering, but also resulted in truly authentic insights being both shared by the children and better understood by the researchers (Coad & Evans, 2008). While the content of children's experiences was not the main focus of this study, instead the focus being on the efficacy of the methodology, the insights gained provided valuable information about the existing teaching and learning experience for all children. Active participation of the children from inception to analysis ensured that the researchers remained active in challenging their adult-informed conclusion-drawing, thereby enhancing the quality of understandings that the researchers gained. An example of the in depth, authentic understandings gained from this study can be found when analysing the transcript generated from the research conversation with Jack, an excerpt from which is shared below:

JACK: [clicks to next photo]. This is... [pause]
INT: Oh, who is that?
JACK: This is a person who actually helped me... well, I had sleeping problems and this lady came in to help me.
INT: Oh right, okay.
JACK: I still do.
INT: So what did she do to help you? Can you tell me a bit about that?
JACK: She showed me some techniques and... so...
INT: So do you struggle to get to sleep sometimes at nighttime?
JACK: Yeah, I'm sleeping in the day today, and I don't sleep in the night.
INT: Oh, so are you tired a lot at school? That must be hard. Do you like school, or would you rather not come to school if you had the choice?
JACK: I wouldn't come to school.
INT: Would you not? Why not? Which bits do you not like about it?
JACK: Erm... the work [laughs].
 ...
INT: It's alright. You've gone back to the start. What's your favourite picture do you think of all of them in that book?

JACK: This one.

INT: That one. So do you think it's the sleep things that have the biggest impact at school for you? Is that the biggest thing about whether or not you enjoy school, if you've slept well or not?

JACK: Well, I usually sleep in school.

INT: You usually do sleep in school? Where do you sleep then? Is there a place you go?

JACK: No.

INT: You just sleep at the desk?

JACK: Yeah [laughs].

INT: That must be hard because you must miss what's going on.

JACK: I don't really care.

INT: Do you not?

JACK: I usually just get a part of it tomorrow. My friend usually tells me what happened.

The above extract highlights the importance of sleep in Jack's ability to effectively engage in the teaching and learning process at school. The school were aware that he had struggled with sleeping at home, however, the multi-sensory, iterative approach to data collection and analysis supported deeper understandings regarding the significance of these issues for Jack. The fact that he chose the photograph of the sleep specialist as his favourite photograph generated on the child led tour highlights the paramount importance of sleep in his ability to function in school. The research conversation also highlighted that his sleep issues were very much still present, despite the support from the sleep specialist ceasing. Finally, the research conversation indicated that there appears to be a lack of effective approach to ensuring that Jack is supported to 'catch up' with work that he has not accessed due to his issues with sleeping. These authentic insights were hugely helpful to the school in ensuring that Jack's sleeping issues were prioritised in the reasonable adjustments made to his teaching and learning experience.

Breaking down communication barriers

As identified in the literature, children identified with SEND often present with a variety of communication skills, which can present challenges and barriers to their effective participation in research (Edwards & Bunn, 2022). The children involved in this study presented with a range of SEND including hearing, cognitive and/or emotionally-related (as can be seen in Table 1). The use of multi-sensory data collection methods meant the study accommodated all of the children's diverse communication preferences; quite simply, there was at least one method of communication that each child felt comfortable to engage with. For example, Amer experienced some difficulties with hearing and used a portable hearing loop to support her in school. Amer was much more comfortable with sharing her thoughts and feelings verbally, through all phases of

the research, evidenced by the high levels of verbal communication displayed throughout the research process. Therefore, during the creation of her special story she chose to utilise the voice recording function to verbally annotate each image in her story. This supported Amer's engagement and motivation to complete the task. For Jack, having the researcher type the captions for his special story provided him with the right level of scaffolding to collaborate in the task and share his insights authentically: 'It's much easier for me if you type it, then I can say it better'.

For many of the children involved, in-depth insights were shared as a result of the methodology circumventing the limitations of traditional, structured interview-style research discussions and, instead, offering a range of communication options throughout the scaffolded approach to data gathering and analysis; this allowed the children to collaborate and present their thoughts in a way that worked for them (Clark, 2017; Vincent & Benstead, 2022). Of course, there is still significant work to be done to reduce the power differential between the adult researcher and child participant; this requires continual reflexivity on the part of the adult researcher, particularly those who are teacher/researchers. However, it is hoped that this work provides a stepping stone to breaking down communication barriers to promote inclusive participation of a wider range of children identified with SEND.

CONCLUSION

This research has provided support for the use of scaffolded multi-sensory data collection approaches in enabling collaborative participation of children with a range of SEND needs in education research exploring their experiences of school (Clark, 2017). The findings highlight that a range of data collection methods can better enable children with differing communication needs/preferences to authentically participate in research (Einarsdóttir, 2007). The research conversations combined with multi-sensory data collection methods signify a departure from traditional researcher-led approaches, instead highlighting the need to involve participants throughout the research process, particularly advocating collaborative iteration when entering the analysis of data phase. Much prior research has implemented the 'follow up' interview with children as a secondary data collection method, with the multi-sensory methods being the primary opportunity to collect the highest quality data (Coad & Evans, 2008). Yet this paper argues that the conversations researchers have with participants subsequent to the image-focused data collection method should be considered integral to effective data analysis, due to the superior opportunities to access children's thought-processes and support higher-quality meaning making (Alderson, 2001; Jones, 2004).

Relinquishing some researcher control over the implementation of the data collection methods and initial

analysis phases supported enhancement of the credibility of data gathered from the participants, contributing to an authentic and meaningful experience for all involved. This links with Clark and Moss's (2011) concept of the researcher exercising 'epistemological humility' over the research; acknowledging that researchers may better hold the agency to contribute to research in a 'macro' sense, but children may be better positioned to exert agency in a 'meso' context (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015). This research opens up future research potential to prioritise inclusivity, authenticity and agency in conducting research involving children and young people with SEND. It is hoped that the specific scaffolded approach to data collection and analysis will be taken forward in future research aiming to authentically access children's perceptions on their educational experiences.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None of the authors have a conflict of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Full ethical approval for this research was granted by the University of Sunderland's ethics committee. Data have not been shared due to the conditions of ethical approval from the University of Sunderland.

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