



Dr Helen Benstead

Academic Director of the Graduate School;
Associate Professor of Inclusive Education

Reece Sohdi

Senior Lecturer, Further Education and Skills

A little bit about me...

- I direct & manage the Postgraduate Research provision across the University of Sunderland
- Former Programme Leader of the MA in Special Educational Needs, Disability and Inclusion
- Avid researcher, generally in the area of participatory research with children
- My passion lies in developing innovative research methodology to support stakeholders in education to have their voices heard



A little bit about Reece

- I currently am Deputy Programme Leader for the PGCE FES, and teach across the Secondary ITT and Master's Provision
- Former English Language college teacher and a widening access and participation practitioner
- Early Career Researcher, focusing on decoloniality / decolonising the curriculum and initial interest in AI
- I have a desire to help students, staff and individuals of all ages, backgrounds and experiences be able to critically reflect, feel included and shape their belonging



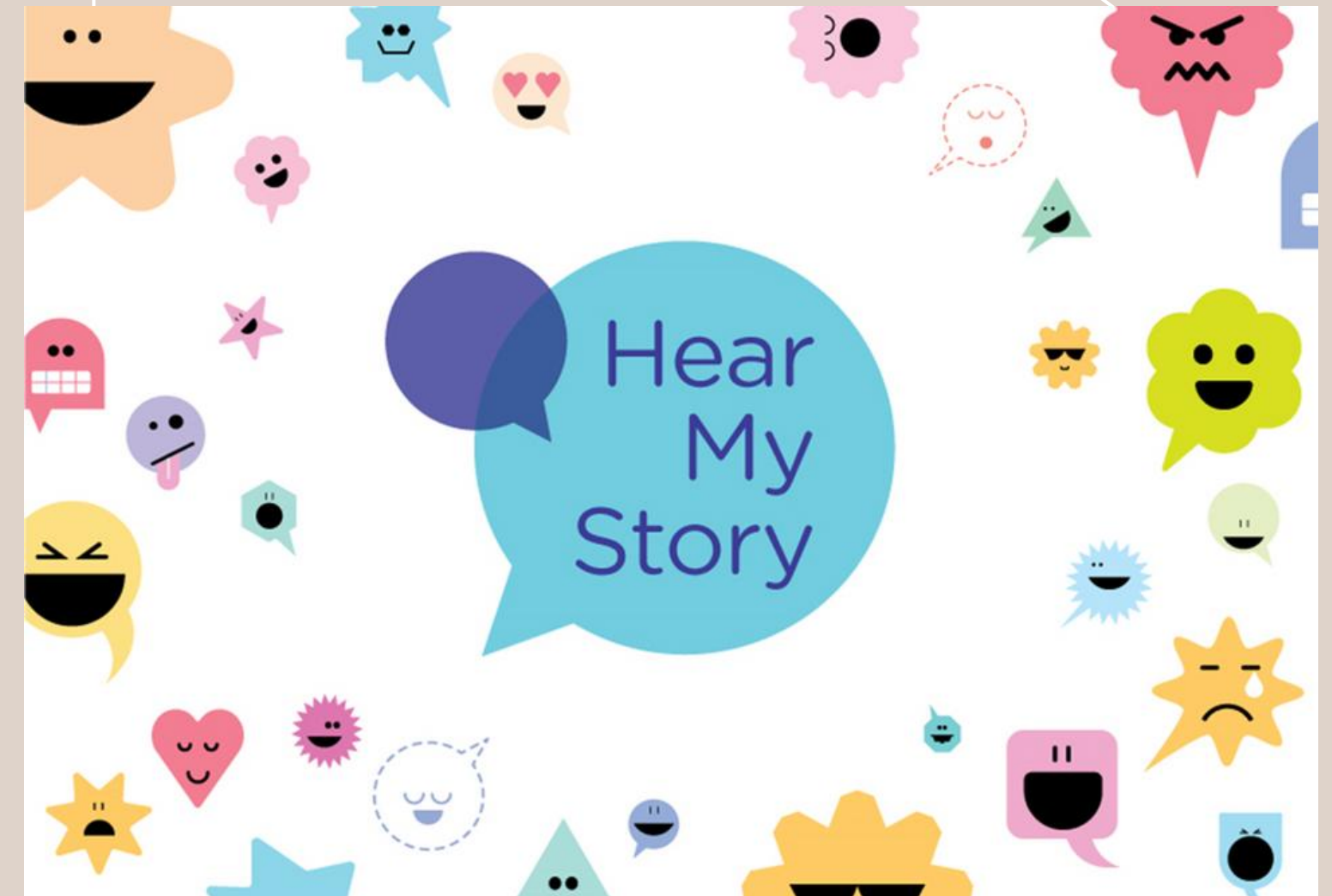
Focus of this session

Introduce you to 'Hear my Story'

Share some background information on my latest piece of research and its potential for supporting students to have their voices heard in educational contexts.

Share the impact of this work to date

Explore some of the research findings and next steps in terms of further research and collaboration



The origins of 'Hear my Story'

Student voice

- I supervised lots of students at the MA Thesis stage and teach Research Methods; I was finding that the 'traditional' research methods weren't supporting students to involve all voices in their research designs
- I was also seeing that children's voices weren't always authentically captured in schools and decision making around their educational experiences was almost entirely adult-informed
- *"conducting research with children, rather than undertaking research about children"* (Shaw, 2020).

The idea

- Review of the literature led me to the 'multi-sensory' and 'mosaic' approaches to data collection with vulnerable participants (initially introduced by Clark and Moss, 2003).
- These methods reduce the emphasis on the written word when designing data collection tools, to better support those who may struggle with communication.
- They also encourage a move away from classrooms and towards the whole school environment as the context for the research.
- I wanted to create something that could authentically capture pupil voice by taking account of different communication needs/preferences and that was appealing to younger children
- This had to result in something that was tangible for adults and easily interpreted by the children, if it were to have any meaningful impact

The project so far...

Phase 1- idea development



I spoke to lots of colleagues, students and school staff about what 'authentic' participatory research looked like to them and reviewed all applications of Clark & Moss' (2011) multi-sensory mosaic methodologies.

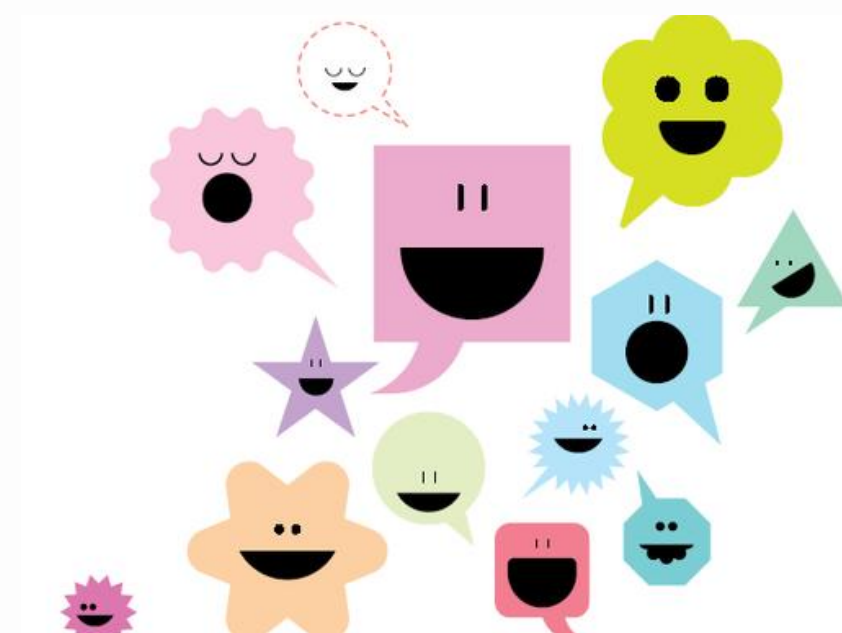
Phase 2- Piloting of the 'story' programme

School Story- Name

Brief 1-2 sentence caption.

I used some gifted 'Social Stories' software to pilot the suitability of a story-based data collection method in enabling students to have their voices heard in educational decision-making. I used transect walks and 'research conversations' to scaffold the collection of data in this phase

Phase 3- Design and piloting with children & wider professionals



In this phase we had the 'Hear my Story' programme designed and branded and piloted it:

- In two schools with 20 children across Durham and Sunderland
- With a team of Educational Psychologists in Newcastle

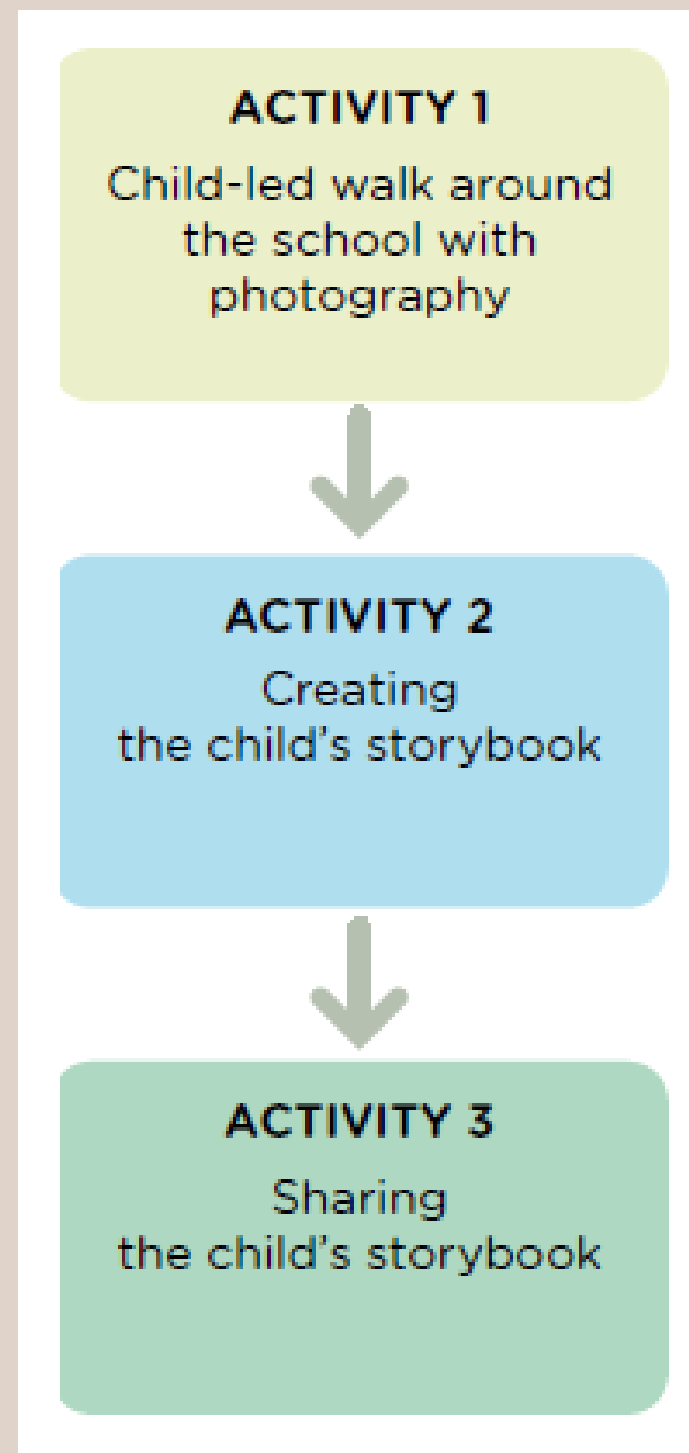
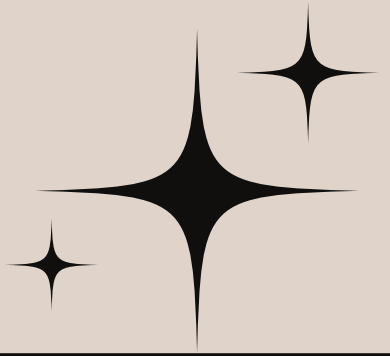
Phase 4- Development of an app & further collaborations



This phase has seen the development of a 'Hear my Story' app, which has been built by BSc Computer Science students here at Sunderland.

We have a consultancy contract with a large MAT this term, to use the programme across 10 of their primary and secondary schools

The programme structure



The app itself has multiple communication elements built into it, to help scaffold those who struggle with 'traditional' forms of communications.

It uses emojis/stickers to help students identify and match an emotion with a picture they have taken. It also uses voice note software as well as text boxes to support students with recording important information about a given image to increase accessibility.

We have three core templates that students can choose between: one aimed at primary aged children, one for secondary and one black template for those who struggle with sensory overload.

Findings of our work

● Key finding

We uniformly felt that the set of data collection methods that we had designed allowed us to gain an **authentic insight into children's experiences** and also allowed us to unlock deeper understandings about **children's learning preferences and social interactions/relationships** than we were expecting

● What has made this successful so far?

- The scaffolded nature of the approach
- Children retaining autonomy over each layer of the data collection process
- Continual re-visiting of the discussion around children's experiences of school, using scaffolding materials
- Clear instructions as to each person's role in the programme; vital that all facilitators had the same approach to ensure reliability and validity of study.

Benstead, H., Graham, V., & Jowett, V. (2024). The power of 'research conversations' in analysing and interpreting the views and perspectives of children identified with SEND. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 24(4), 1035-1045.

Findings so far...

Researcher: Can you tell me about this picture of your classroom?

Child: Loud and terrifying.

Researcher: Oh is it?

Child: Yeah, because Mr X is a shouty person. So if he gets too annoyed, he'll be shouting.



Researcher: Do you want to tell me about this picture?

Child: It's the rainbow room. I like the floor because it's comfy on the bean bags. I really like them because they're colourful as well. It makes me feel calm and I can concentrate on my work.

Stakeholder perspectives



“Staff were positive about the lasting impact of this programme on his (child’s) educational experiences”

“Children really took ownership. I didn’t feel like the adult was leading the work at all – in a positive way!”

“The emojis bridge the gap between what the child can and wants to say”

“This programme shows what’s important to the child, which is ultimately most important”

“This is flexible in its implementation and is especially helpful for school transition”

“The act of making the story is almost as important as the story itself”

“The stories have given us authentic quick wins which can impact the learner but also the wider narrative”

“This gives children time and space to process their feelings”

An interesting methodological consideration

- Conducting this work has prompted me to reflect on the ways in which academics undertaking participatory research approach such research, from an epistemological perspective
- The ways in which researchers approach ‘conducting research *with* children’ appears to be very disparate and lacks consistency (Sevon et al., 2023).
- Researchers do not always “ideologically commit to address children’s participation in the research process”(ibid, p.1013).
- This lack of consistency could be problematic in terms of the potential quality, credibility and overall usefulness of findings generated from participatory research involving children
- “While it is generally agreed that ‘participation’ is a positive attribute of research...there has been limited methodological reflection upon what the term actually means” (Gallagher & Gallagher, 2008, p.502).

Questions for consideration: how far can and/or should we involve children in research? Is it possible to reach true co-construction of research with children? What does this co-construction look like?

Thank you!

Any questions?

- ✉ helen.benstead@sunderland.ac.uk
- ✉ reece.sohdi@sunderland.ac.uk