

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Hear My Story: Educational psychologists' experiences of a multi-sensory participatory approach to pupil voice for children with SEND

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**Abstract**

This article presents the findings from a qualitative study of Educational Psychologists' (EPs) experiences of implementing Hear My Story, a multi-sensory data collection tool, developed to support children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) with communicating their lived experiences of education. Building upon phase 1 of this project, this second-phase study explores the ways in which a group of EPs based in Northeast England facilitated, explored, and shared children's stories to support their experiences across education and health. The data analysed in this study were gathered via a focus group method, conducted after practitioners piloted the approach across mainstream and specialist settings. Thematic analysis generated four interrelated themes: (1) authenticity, enjoyment and emotional value; (2) facilitation and professional judgement; (3) accessibility; and (4) opportunities for embedding stories in practice. The findings indicate that Hear My Story provides a mechanism for surfacing nuanced insights into children's school experiences, and indeed, their experiences outside of school that influence their access to education. The article discusses implications for inclusive practice, including the potential to bridge the gap between education and health, ensuring meaningful sharing of the stories so that pupil voice has tangible influence on educational decision making and everyday provision.

**KEYWORDS**

educational psychology, inclusive education, participatory methods, pupil voice

**Key Points**

The key findings of this study indicate that:

- Pupil voice can emerge through process, symbolism and relational meaning making rather than verbal clarity alone.
- Multi-sensory participatory methods can challenge deficit-oriented assumptions about communication and agency.
- Educational Psychologists used 'Hear my Story' to navigate tensions between authenticity, interpretation, and statutory accountability.
- Embedding child-led narratives into Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) supported the translation of voice into agency.

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## INTRODUCTION

Across the last decade or so, the aspiration that children and young people should be listened to and actively involved in educational decision making has been widely endorsed in international policy and guidance (DfE, 2025; Gottschalk & Borhan, 2023). Yet, for pupils identified with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND) in particular, the opportunities to participate in educational decision making remain disparate (Edwards & Bunn, 2022). Opportunities to contribute are often through adult-devised methodologies that privilege those with typical communication abilities, focused on fluency in verbal contributions, supporting swift adult-led analysis (Vincent & Benstead, 2022). This can unintentionally marginalise pupils who communicate differently, prefer visual or symbolic modes, or require time and relational safety to express themselves. The consequence is that adults may collect ‘views’ without accessing the nuanced understandings of children's experiences—particularly the emotional and context-bound aspects of school life that matter most to them (Mukherji & Albon, 2022). This study responds to this gap by examining a multi-sensory approach designed to better enable child participation and the ways in which this can be captured in research design.

Hear My Story is presented in this article as a multi-sensory data collection method, developed to enable children to autonomously create and share a narrative of school life using photographs, emojis, short captions and/or voice notes. The design assumption is simple but significant from an epistemological perspective in that it promotes children autonomously selecting what to show and how to show it. Importantly, the approach positions story-making as iterative and dialogic. Children take images on a child-led tour of their school, return to them with a trusted adult and explore what they might represent. The narrative contained in the stories is therefore co-constructed through relational interactions, in which it is hoped the child will share the distribution of ‘power’ through the research process. This involves a significant epistemological shift from the historic involvement of children in research, from somewhat tokenistic to full co-constructors when adapting, and indeed, analysing the data to emerge from the method (Sevón et al., 2023).

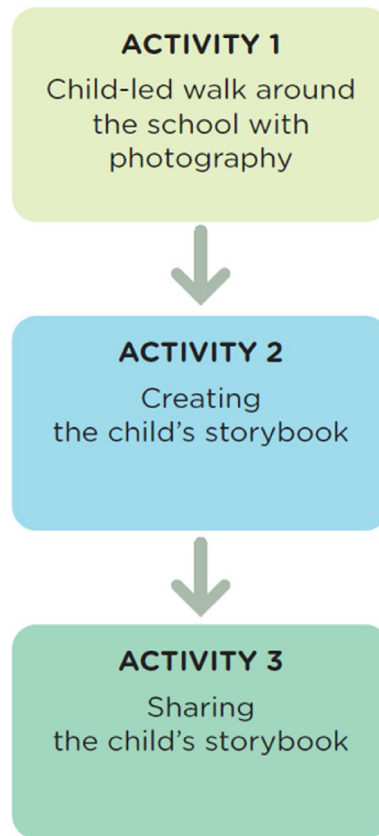
## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This study is an extension phase 1 of a project which aims to support children with a range of communication needs/preferences to share their views around what works for them in their educational experiences (Benstead et al., 2024; Benstead, 2019). The findings from phase 1 of the study indicated that providing a range of mediums via which children can share their experiences was indicative of supporting both authentic participation in educational research, but also in gaining access to children's thought processes to support higher quality meaning making about their experiences (Benstead et al., 2024).

Our work in this area attempts to move forward the epistemological debate relating to ideals about capturing ‘pupil voice’ to the practical conditions that enable us to enact this ideology. With specific reference to children with identified SEND needs in mainstream settings, prior research highlights that pupils identified with SEND can struggle to experience social inclusion and are often positioned at the edges of peer and academic groups despite the rhetoric of inclusion (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Thus, there is a tension between ‘ideal’ participation of those with additional needs and the ‘current’ realities encountered by pupils. The phase of work explored in this article allows us to move beyond building an understanding of methods that might work to support participation of children with SEND in research and towards testing whether a specific multi-sensory method (Hear My Story) can help to bridge it. Our interest lies as much in the methodological and epistemological underpinnings that drive the implementation of the method, as it does in the stories that the children produce. A description of the activities that make up Hear My Story as a multi-sensory data collection method is shared below.

Figure 1 shares the practical elements that make up Hear My Story as a multi-method data collection approach. Activity 1 draws upon research that has cemented the usefulness of transect walks as participatory data collection methods, with children specifically. They are deemed to be particularly powerful in building effective relationships between adult researcher and child participant, often redressing the frequent power imbalance between adult and child (Clark & Moss, 2008). Adults undertake the role of facilitator in the walks, with children directing the spaces that are visited, photographs taken on the walks, and the discussion that accompanies the walk. This ensures that children retain autonomy over the method, which was concluded to be vital in phase 1 of this research (Benstead et al., 2024).

Once the walks have been undertaken, the child and adult researcher meet again to undertake further work utilising the photographs that were taken by the child on the walk. These photographs are reviewed by the child and they independently select 6–10 photographs with which to create their digital storybooks, using a template designed and developed as Hear My Story. The photographs are inserted into a book-like digital template in which there is an option to record a voice note to describe the importance of the picture or space to type a caption underneath each image. The child can also choose from a set of uniquely designed emojis, which can be dragged and dropped onto each page of



**FIGURE 1** Scaffold of Hear My Story.

the storybook they create. These emojis are designed to provide children who struggle with verbally articulating their thoughts and feelings to share them via visual prompts. [Figure 2](#) shares a fictional page from the storybook template, with the emojis clearly visible down the right-hand side of the image.

The final activity that encompasses Hear My Story is that of sharing the child's storybook, denoted as 'research conversations' in phase 1 of the research (Benstead et al., 2024). This is the stage at which the learnings contained in the stories can be made visible to a range of pertinent stakeholders in a child's education but also can be used to enact change in a child's teaching, learning and support experiences. The research conversations also enable the children to partake in the analysis phase of the research, providing an opportunity for 'sense-checking' adult meaning making in relation to the stories with children during follow up discussions and meetings with stakeholders. Fundamentally, the method is intended to support adults involved with achieving 'empathetic interpretation' of children's experiences (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008, p. 29).

## **RATIONALE: EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGISTS (EPs) AND HEAR MY STORY**

In phase 1 of this project, we were able to provide evidence-based insights into the usefulness of such a multi-sensory data collection method in enabling collaborative participation of children with a range of SEND needs in educational research that aims to explore their experiences of school (Benstead et al., 2024). However, it is important to recognise that children identified with SEND needs are often supported by a range of multi-agency professionals, all of whom advise on effective teaching and learning approaches for these children.

It is widely recognised that effective multi-agency working to meet the needs of children identified with SEND is vital to effective outcomes, yet it is also widely recognised that this is challenging to achieve within the current system (Tyldesley-Marshall et al., 2023). There are a myriad of challenges to effective multi-agency working including, lack of clarity around roles, responsibilities and expectations, resource constraints and funding pressures, as well as challenges to consistent information sharing amongst agencies (Mayat, 2024). One of the most integral relationships to supporting effective educational experiences of children with a variety of SEND needs is that of school-based professionals and EPs (Atfield et al., 2023).



FIGURE 2 Hear My Story digital template.

EPs often work at the interface of health and education, facilitating or advising on mechanisms for gathering pupil views and implementing learnings from having gathered them. They are therefore well placed to comment on the processes by which meaning is scaffolded, negotiated and translated into educational decision making. At the same time, EPs often work to a slightly different agenda to teaching professionals, given that their role is primarily rooted in health rather than education. Indeed, EPs can act as bridges between stakeholders that would otherwise struggle to communicate (Milletti, 2022). Understanding the perceived robustness of Hear My Story for practicing EPs can provide an additional layer of evidence regarding the usefulness of the method for enabling pupil voice.

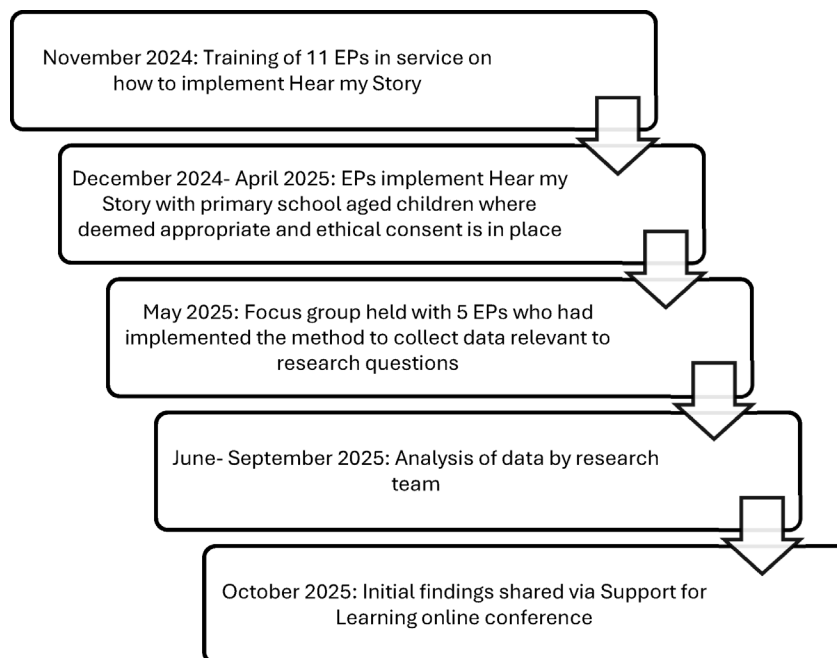
The involvement of EPs in this phase of the research was also motivated by practical considerations; it is generally accepted that Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) often fail to authentically capture pupil voice. Consequently, EHCPs can lack coherent, multi-agency informed information as to a pupil's current educational experiences and/or outcomes (Sharma, 2021). Since EPs are regular contributors to EHCPs, it was deemed useful to capture their views as to how a tool such as Hear My Story might support better EHCPs writing and evidence-capture.

The remainder of this article is scaffolded by a detailed consideration of the methodology undertaken in this study, sharing findings informed by our thematic analysis and considering the implications of our findings for inclusive multi-agency practice. Throughout, we intentionally frame our discussion with practical considerations in mind; this article, although rooted in robust research, is intended to inform practice and reflects this in its tone.

## METHODOLOGY

This research followed a singular case study design, involving EPs from one service in the North-East of England. The case study approach enabled us to generate rich descriptions from the EPs, exploring the usefulness and perceived efficacy of Hear My Story, scaffolding detailed meaning making around our topics of interest (Yin, 2018).

The process followed in implementing the case study is detailed in [Figure 3](#):



**FIGURE 3** Timeline of methodology and accompanying methods.

## Research questions

The questions that drove this study were intended to explore the methodological integrity of Hear My Story as a data collection method, as well as the usefulness of the method to generate and interpret understandings of school experiences for children identified with SEND. They were also aimed at highlighting any potential for more effective multi-agency working between education and health in meeting the needs of children identified with SEND.

RQ1: To what extent does the implementation of Hear My Story enable children identified with SEND to communicate their experiences of education to a trusted adult?

RQ2: To what extent do EPs view the tool as useful in enabling them to capture relevant data on the experiences of school for a child with whom they are working?

RQ3: To what extent can Hear My Story promote effective multi-agency working between Health and Education?

## Data collection methods and ethical considerations

We adopted a qualitative, exploratory case study design to generate rich descriptions of EPs' experiences with Hear My Story. Eleven EPs gave their consent to participate in the study, with 10 of the 11 attending a workshop session at which the Principal Investigator trained the EPs on how to implement Hear My Story and shared all relevant materials relating to the method with them. The workshop session was held in November 2024 and EPs were given a 5-month period following the workshop in which to implement the method with suitable children in primary schools across the location in which the EPs work. Participants included a mixture of early career and experienced practitioners from a local authority service, supporting mainstream primary, secondary and specialist settings.

Once the data collection phase had been completed, the EPs were invited to take part in a focus group roundtable event, facilitated by the Principal Investigator and Research Associate. Five EPs attended the event, as those who had successfully implemented the method with at least one child in their work over the prior 5-month period. The focus group session was scaffolded by a semi-structured questionnaire, which attendees completed upon arrival and which aligned with the research questions pertinent to this study.

Following the semi-structured questionnaire, an exploratory focus group was conducted, allowing the researchers to gain more in depth insights into the overall usefulness of Hear My Story (Cohen et al., 2017). The focus group discussion focused on the following five areas, informed by the research questions: perceived relevance and constraints of Hear My Story; strategies for enabling children's agency; interpretive challenges; opportunities to share stories across education and health; and examples of change in educational experiences that could be attributed to the method. Focus groups were recorded and transcribed, with permission from all those attending. The transcriptions

and semi-structured questionnaire responses underwent reflexive thematic analysis, moving from inductive coding of responses to the development and refinement of themes relating to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Byrne, 2022).

Ethical considerations were central to all phases of the study. Full ethical approval was granted by the University of Sunderland's ethics committee, as well as by the Head of Education/SEN at the LA's EP service. Consent forms and information sheets were distributed to and collected back from all EPs who took part in the research voluntarily. They were also created and distributed to all Headteachers of the schools in which the pupils who were in receipt of the method were located; Headteachers signed the consent forms in their role as Gatekeepers of the schools involved. The stories that were created, and the photographs that informed them, remained in school and on a locked device, accessible only by the EP involved so that no data were shared more widely than in usual practice. No pupil images or identifying content were collected, stored, or viewed by the research team. EPs spoke about their practice experiences, and where they quoted a child's words, they did so anonymously. While the focus on EP perspectives limits claims about pupils' experiences, the design offers practice-focused insight into the context-specific dilemmas and opportunities associated with implementing the method.

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Thematic analysis of data highlighted four key interrelated themes, which are presented as findings in this section: (1) authenticity, enjoyment and emotional value; (2) facilitation and professional judgement; (3) accessibility; and (4) opportunities for embedding stories in practice.

### Authenticity, enjoyment and emotional value

All EPs involved in the focus group discussion emphasised the emotional significance of the process for children. The act of creating and sharing a story was described as intrinsically valuable, sometimes irrespective of the final product that was created. As one EP reflected, *'the act of doing is as valuable as the story'* (H). This was seen by EPs to be particularly important for children who were otherwise reluctant to engage in the sharing of or unable to articulate their experiences verbally.

EPs reported heightened engagement, pride and self-esteem from some pupils who took part in Hear My Story, especially when pupils were able to share their story with trusted adults. One practitioner described a Year 6 pupil who became *'passionate when going round the school'*, noting the visible boost to confidence and self-worth. Another reflected that children *'weren't asking for the world... it's so simple in terms of changes'* (J), suggesting that being heard through the process of taking part in Hear My Story itself was affirming.

Importantly, EPs noted that meaning was sometimes conveyed through absence or omission rather than explicit narration. For example, one EP described how *'for one of mine, they didn't take pics of any people which I think symbolises the loneliness'* (R), while another pupil photographed empty playground spaces that were initially interpreted as social isolation but later understood as a preference for *'quiet places'* (H). These examples reinforced that authenticity did not always emerge through explicit statements, but through patterns, choices and omissions within the story.

### Facilitation and professional judgement

A dominant theme concerned the central role of the facilitator in supporting meaning making. EPs repeatedly stressed that photographs or emojis which at first appeared random or superficial at the beginning of the story-creating process often became meaningful through sensitive dialogue as the story took shape. One EP described a pupil who took a photograph of a *'water bottle on a chair'*, which later opened into a discussion about superheroes, helping others, and future aspirations.

Several participants emphasised that this interpretative work required professional judgement on when to step back and let the child lead the process. As one EP reflected, *'It depends on the facilitator afterwards because the random pictures could be meaningful'* (J). Another noted, *'I didn't feel like I as the adult was leading the conversation'* (R), highlighting the delicate balance between scaffolding and over-direction.

EPs also identified a tension between the child's narrative and the professional understanding or priorities that sit alongside it. One participant observed that *'lots of things that I wanted people to know from a psychological perspective... weren't visible in the overall story'* (K). This led to suggestions for an optional professional layer that could *'add insights to the child's voice... the why is missing which the EP can add'* (K), particularly for transitions or statutory processes.

## Accessibility

The accessibility of the approach was widely valued, particularly its use of photography, emojis, text and voice notes to support diverse communication needs. EPs described children engaging in different ways depending on their strengths, regulation and familiarity with the adult. For example, one EP noted in their questionnaire responses that a Year 3 pupil *'loved phones and photography'* but *'didn't fully understand the core usage of it and why'* (R). However, this was not seen as problematic: *'Is it okay if they don't understand the process but use it to start the conversation?'* (R).

There was a consensus amongst the group that the use of emojis generated mixed but typically insightful reflections. EPs felt that some children selected emojis deliberately to support emotional articulation, while others chose *'random'* or humorous symbols. One EP reflected that a child created *'a fictional story about friendship and loneliness'* using emojis, requiring gentle redirection back to lived experience (J). Others suggested that ambiguity and story-telling, whether fictional or not, was a strength rather than a limitation: *'To the child it makes sense'* (H).

There was a consensus that the limited number of emojis helped prevent overload, particularly for younger children, though EPs noted that older or more articulate pupils might benefit from expanded emotional vocabulary or a short *'task about the emojis or emotions to determine what they mean'* (R).

## Opportunities for embedding stories in practice

A key concern for EPs was ensuring that the enabling of pupil voice through Hear My Story did not become performative or tokenistic. Several participants expressed discomfort with stories being *'put in a box'* after children had invested *'time and cognitive energies'* (H). EPs emphasised the importance of children seeing that *'somebody cares and does something about it'* (H).

Strong support was expressed for embedding *Hear My Story* outputs into EHCPs, annual reviews and transition planning. One EP suggested the story could be *'put into the EHCP itself'* (R), while another proposed a structured *'Plan, Do, Review'* proforma that linked a child's images and captions to strengths, priorities and next steps (J). This was seen as a way of ensuring learner voice informed, rather than sat alongside, professional decision making.

EPs also described tangible changes arising from the process. Teachers reportedly commented, *'I don't think we would have known this but now we do'* (J), particularly in relation to emotional regulation, relationships and learning preferences. These insights often led to *'easily implemented changes'* that were *'so simple but often forgot about'* (H).

Overall, EPs viewed *Hear My Story* as a flexible, ethical and practical approach that enabled them to gain an insight into children's lived experiences, while also demanding reflexivity and care from those facilitating it.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This study set out to explore three related questions: the extent to which *Hear My Story* enables children with SEND to communicate their experiences of education (RQ1); how useful EPs perceive the method to be in capturing relevant data about pupils' school experiences (RQ2); and whether the approach has potential to support more effective multi-agency working between education and health (RQ3). Taken together, the findings suggest that *Hear My Story* operates as more than a data collection tool; rather, it functions as a relational, participatory process that foregrounds children's lived experience while requiring careful professional facilitation and reflexivity.

### Enabling communication through process, not product

In relation to RQ1, the findings demonstrate that *Hear My Story* enabled children with SEND to communicate their experiences of education in ways that were meaningful to them, even when traditional verbal articulation was limited. Crucially, communication did not always take the form of explicit statements about support needs or difficulties. Instead, children expressed meaning through patterns of choice, omission, repetition and symbolism, such as photographing empty spaces, avoiding images of people, or selecting particular emojis.

This aligns with prior research suggesting that children with SEND may communicate most authentically through non-linear, visual or symbolic modes when given time, relational safety and autonomy (Mukherji & Albon, 2022). EPs' reflections that *'the act of doing is as valuable as the story'* reinforce the idea that participation itself can be communicative, even where outcomes appear ambiguous. Importantly, this challenges deficit-oriented assumptions that equate effective communication with clarity, fluency or adult-defined relevance. The findings also highlight that *Hear My Story* creates time and space for reflection, allowing children to revisit experiences iteratively rather than respond

to direct questioning. This appears particularly important for children whose experiences of school are emotionally complex or shaped by anxiety, trauma or exclusion, and supports the argument that enabling voice requires attention to process as well as method.

## Professional judgement and interpretive responsibility

In addressing RQ2, EPs overwhelmingly viewed *Hear My Story* as a useful and robust method for capturing rich, contextually grounded insights into pupils' school experiences. However, its usefulness was closely tied to the quality of facilitation rather than the tool alone. EPs described how apparently random photographs or emoji choices became meaningful through dialogue, prompting reflection on the interpretive role of the adult in participatory work.

This finding speaks directly to ongoing debates about participation and power in research with children (Sevón et al., 2023). While *Hear My Story* was designed to redistribute control to children, the findings suggest that adult interpretation remains unavoidable. What mattered was not the absence of adult involvement, but the manner in which professionals exercised judgement such as knowing when to step back, when to probe and when to hold ambiguity. EPs' suggestions for an optional professional layer that contextualises children's stories are particularly important. While there was a strong commitment to preserving the integrity of pupil voice, practitioners were also acutely aware of the demands of statutory and multi-agency systems that require interpretation, explanation and formulation. This highlights a tension between authenticity and translation, suggesting that inclusive practice requires mechanisms that allow children's narratives to remain visible while still being meaningfully integrated into professional decision making.

## From voice to influence: Implications for multi-agency working

In relation to RQ3, the findings suggest that *Hear My Story* holds significant potential to support more effective multi-agency working, particularly at the interface of education and health. EPs described how children's stories provided insights that were readily understandable to teachers, parents and other professionals, often revealing information that had not emerged through assessment or review processes.

There was strong consensus that embedding stories into EHCPs, annual reviews and transition processes could help bridge gaps between services and reduce the risk of pupil voice being marginalised. This aligns with existing critiques of EHCP processes that highlight the absence of authentic pupil perspectives (Sharma, 2021). However, EPs were also clear that for such integration to be meaningful, systems must respond. Stories that are shared without action risk reinforcing cynicism and disengagement. Importantly, EPs positioned *Hear My Story* as a tool that could humanise multi-agency processes, supporting relational continuity and empathy. The suggestion that a receiving professional could acknowledge a child's story—'I've seen your story'—illustrates how small practices can have significant relational impact.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

It is important to acknowledge that the children themselves were not directly consulted about the usefulness of the method in enabling them to share their voices. This is an important limitation of the research; however, as the method was necessarily implemented anonymously, in light of ethical considerations, this was unavoidable. Future implementation of *Hear My Story* should involve pupils' voices directly in the analysis of the approach and explore whether or not they experience agency, recognition and/or changes to their educational experiences through the method. The sample was also modest and context-specific, limiting generalisation and transferability.

## CONCLUSION

*Hear My Story* offers a unique opportunity to authentically capture pupil voice to better inform the teaching and learning experiences of children identified with SEND needs. The multi-sensory nature of the method supports children with a diverse range of communication needs to authentically and autonomously implement the method and share their views. The data gathered from EPs who have implemented the method highlight that—the stories created by the children often revealed needs and preferences that were easy to accommodate once seen, and that the act of doing (choosing and arranging images, using emojis, narrating ideas) was valuable in and of itself.

This study contributes to a growing practical conversation about how to enact inclusive practices with those who are, arguably, most at risk of exclusion. The findings of this study are intended to contribute to an important conversation about how to ensure that pupils have a voice in their educational experiences; Hear My Story enables children to share their thoughts in an accessible and inviting way. Importantly, the value of *Hear My Story* lies not only in the stories produced, but in the process of creating them. The act of choosing images, attaching meaning, revisiting experiences and sharing narratives with trusted adults was experienced by EPs as intrinsically valuable for children. In many cases, the stories revealed needs and preferences that were straightforward to accommodate once they had been made visible, highlighting how small, responsive adjustments can have a meaningful impact.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**Reece Sohdi:** Writing—original draft; methodology; writing—review and editing; formal analysis; project administration.

**Helen Benstead:** Conceptualization; investigation; funding acquisition; writing—original draft; methodology; writing—review and editing.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest in relation to this work.

## 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 was granted by the University of Sunderland's ethics committee and BERA (2024) guidelines were adhered to throughout.

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