

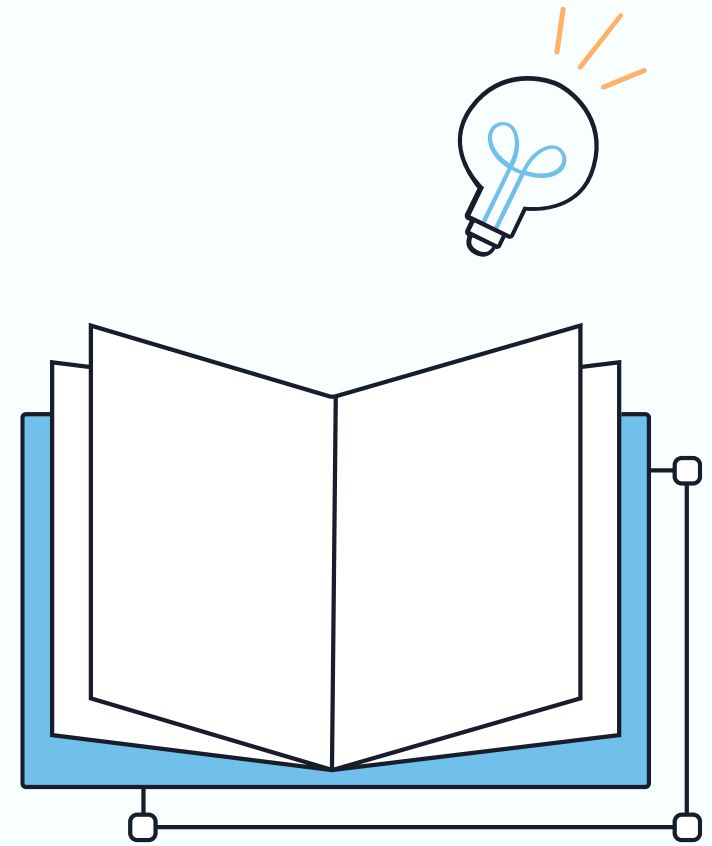
HEAR MY STORY

Enhancing Pupil Voice

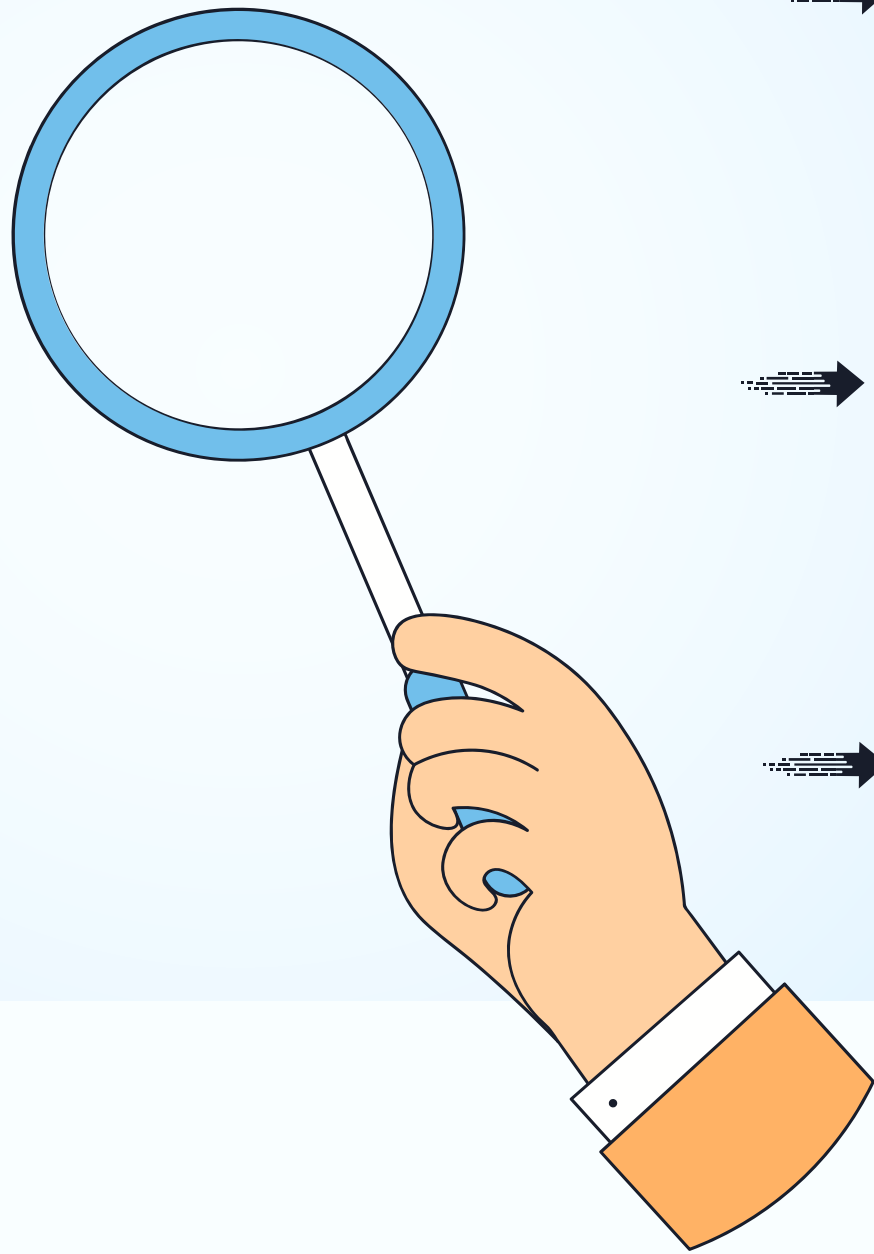
Can pupil voice ever be authentic,
and if so, what are we willing to do
with what we hear?



Dr Helen Benstead
Associate Professor of Inclusive Education
Academic Director of the Graduate School



Quick show of hands



Have you ever asked children what they think?

Did anything change because of it?

Did pupils know what changed?

Opening Poll



What does the phrase ‘authentic pupil voice’ mean to you?



Share your thoughts — responses will appear live on the word cloud.

The Provocation

How do we know when we have captured pupils' voices authentically and what should we do with them?

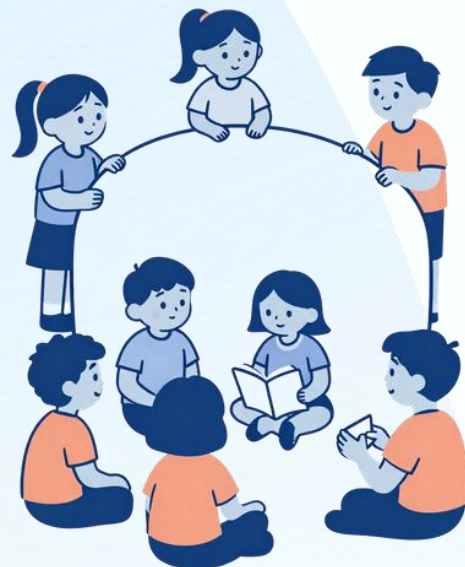


Origins of Hear my Story



The problem with traditional voice capture methods

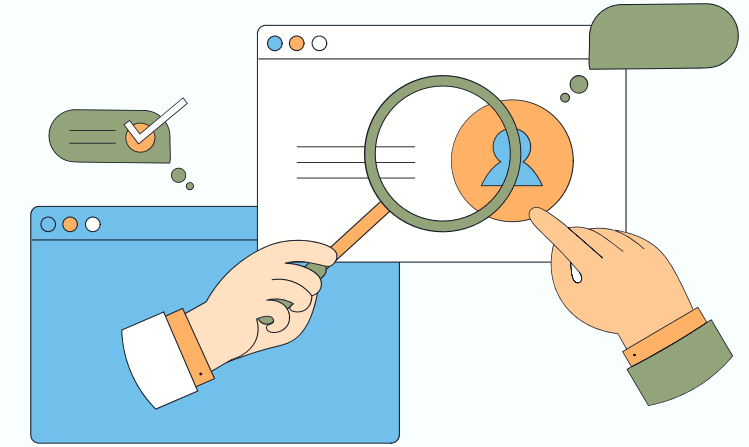
Conventional approaches such as interviews and questionnaires often fail to capture the full range of children's experiences, excluding those who struggle to express themselves through text or spoken word alone.



The need for inclusive approaches

A new approach was needed — one that could reach all pupils, including those whose voices are rarely heard, and allow them to communicate in ways that feel natural and meaningful to them.

What is Hear my Story?



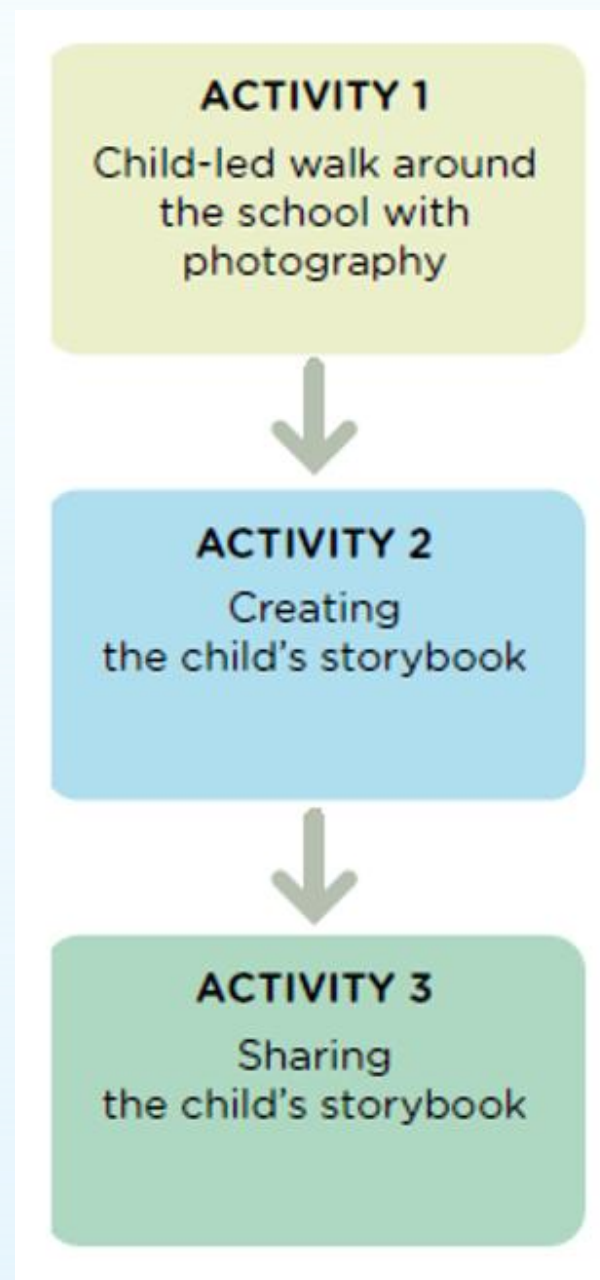
Digital Storytelling Approach

A digital storytelling approach that enables children to communicate through multiple modes, including images, voice, text, and emojis, to express their experiences and perspectives authentically (arguably!).

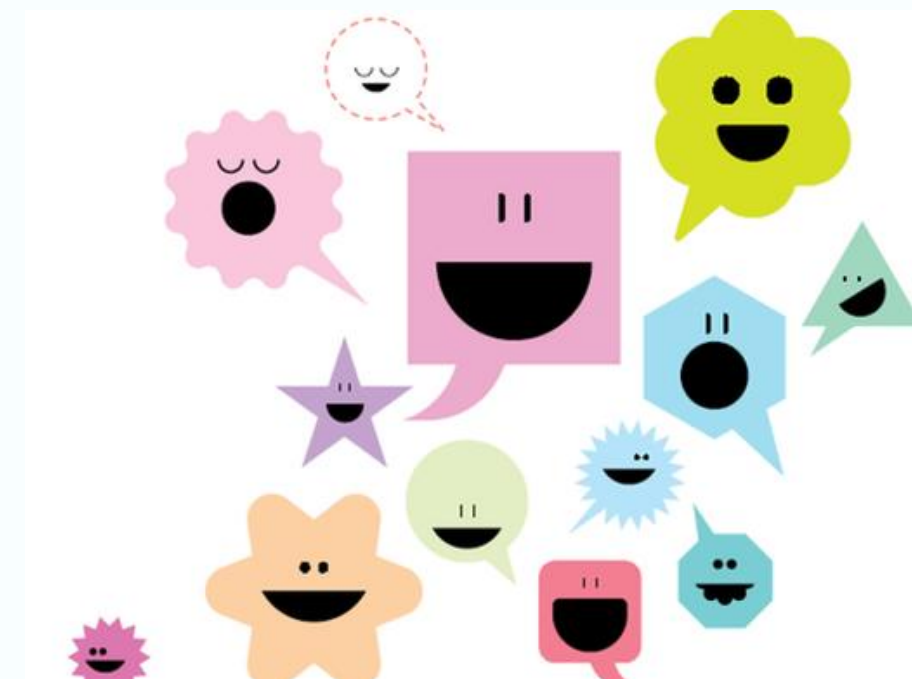
Multiple Modes of Communication

Children are given tools to tell their stories in ways that feel natural to them, moving beyond traditional questionnaires and interviews to capture richer, more inclusive pupil voice.

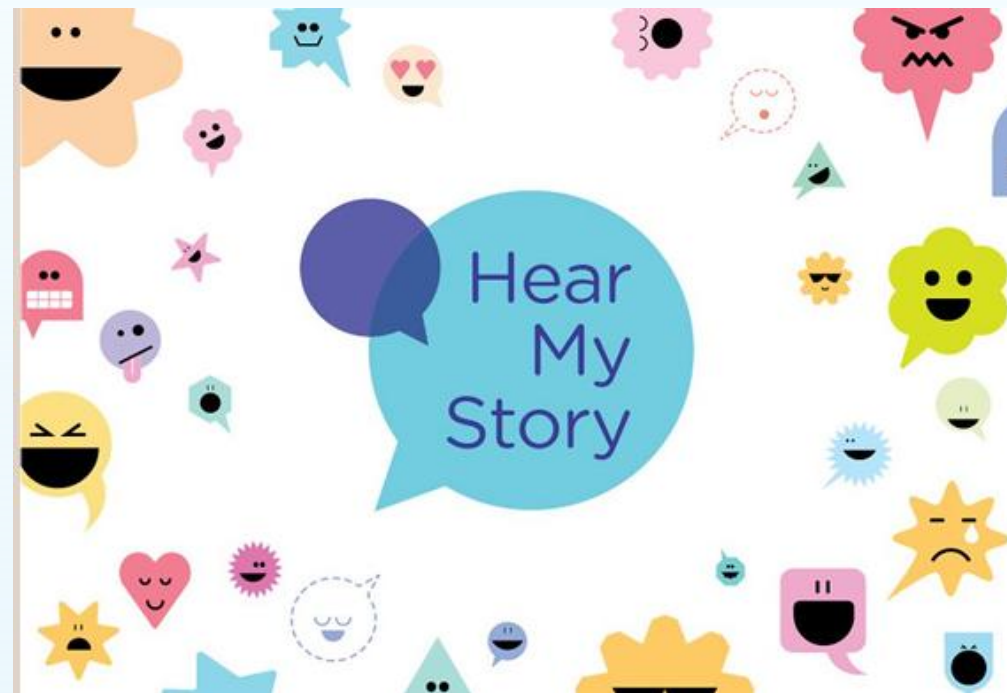
Hear my Story in practice



- Templates
- Images
- Emojis
- Voice Notes
- Personal Narratives
- Reflection
- Storytelling Modes
- Multimodal Tools
- Child-Led
- Narratives



Hear my Story in practice



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.

Who is responsible for sharing pupil voice?

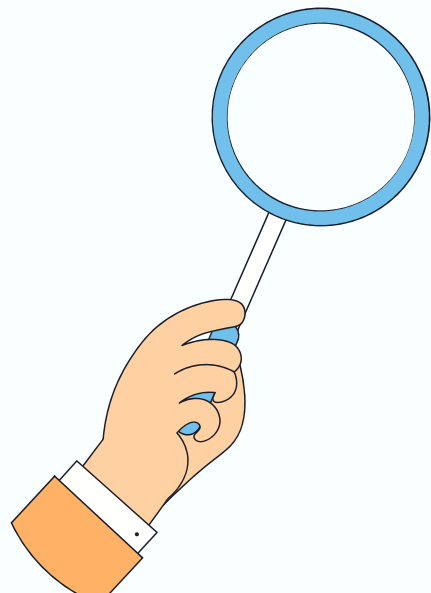


Who is responsible for sharing pupil voice?

Teachers, researchers, leaders, parents?

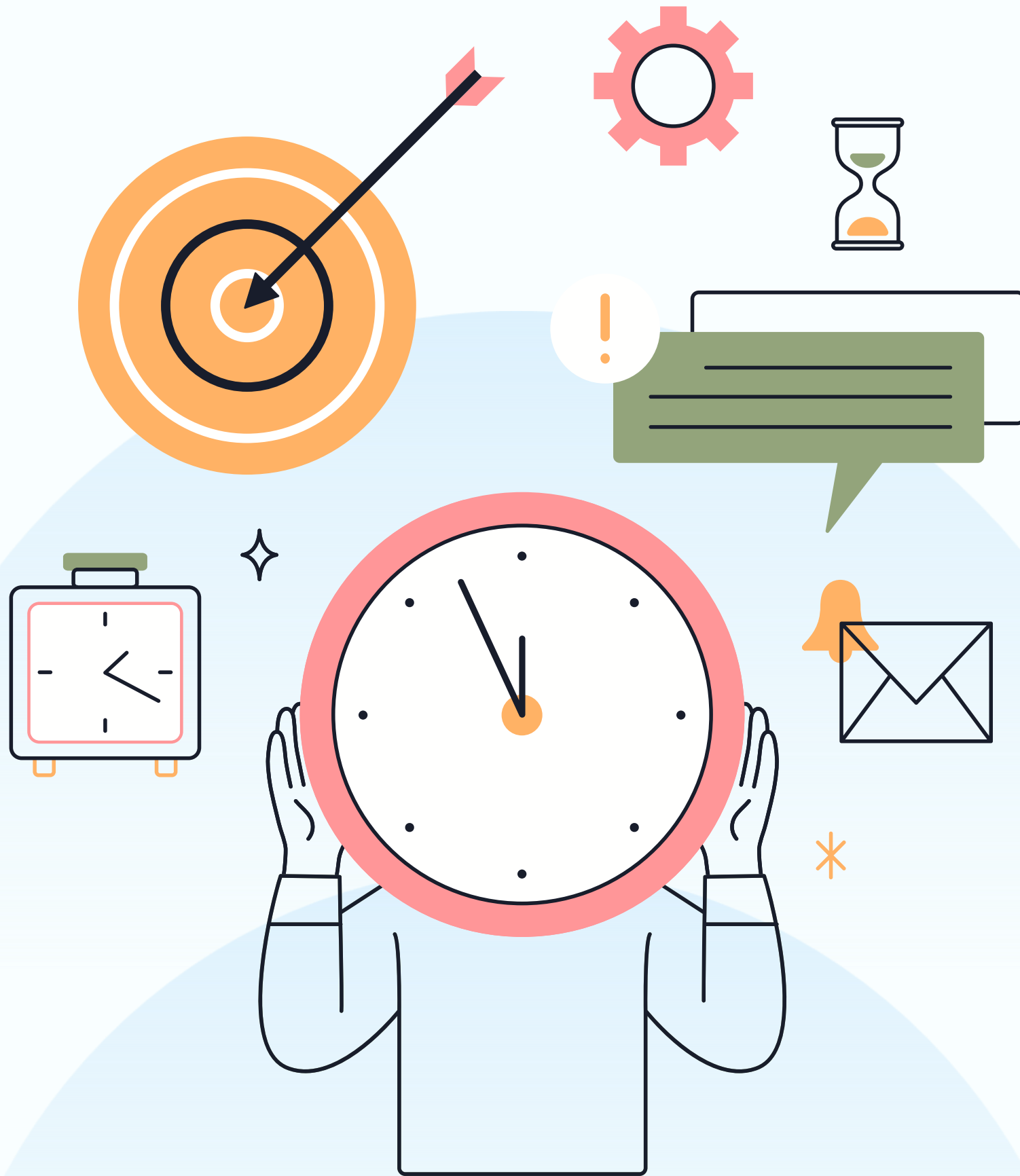


Is it the pupils themselves — or is it everyone together? Rank the options and share your thinking.



But have we really captured authentic voice?

- If a child uses the app, does that automatically constitute authentic pupil voice?
- Who decides what counts as authentic? Who shapes the tools, the prompts, the interface? And whose interpretation of the story becomes the 'truth'?
- Authenticity cannot be assumed simply because technology is involved.





Five Uncomfortable Truths

- Children may tell us what adults want to hear
- Adults interpret stories
- Some voices are heard more than others
- Voice is contextual
- Listening without action can be harmful

Towards an Inclusive Epistemology



Extract for consideration

“Using participatory methods does not automatically make research participatory.”

Whose voice are we hearing?

A photography activity may be designed as an empowering opportunity for children to autonomously document their own perspectives, yet in practice it might be heavily moderated by adults in terms of what counts as permissible content, how the images are interpreted and how they contribute to findings.

Towards an Inclusive Epistemology



Power, Participation & Agency

Authentic pupil voice requires a shift in power dynamics. Children must be active participants with genuine agency, not simply consulted, but meaningfully involved in shaping decisions that affect them. ‘Thick’ vs ‘Thin’ agency.

Reflexivity & Co-construction

Adults must critically examine their own role in interpreting and shaping pupil voice. Authentic epistemology is built together- through ongoing dialogue, shared meaning-making, and honest reflection.

The tokenism challenge

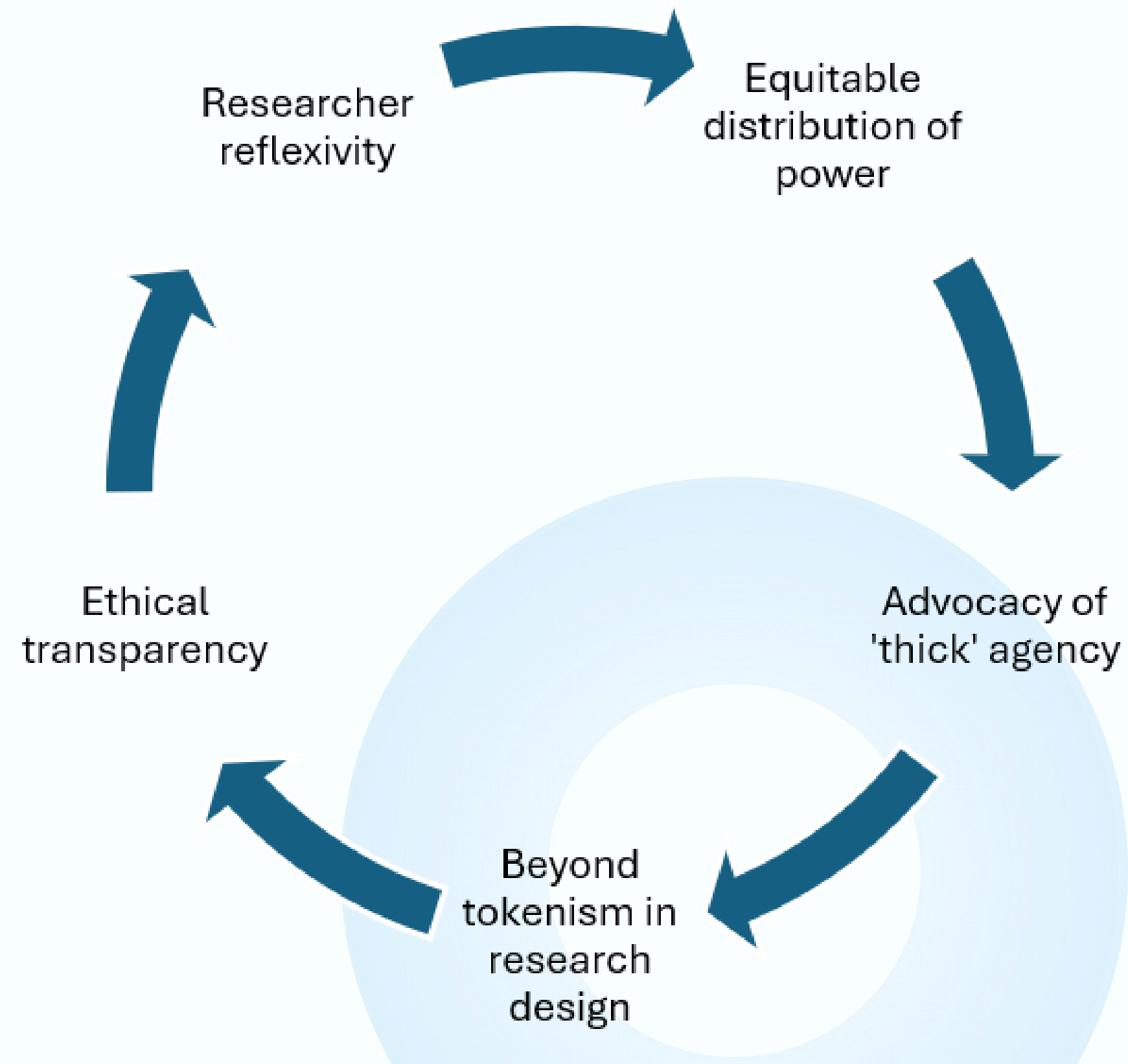
An inclusive epistemology positions participation not as the inclusion of isolated activities, typically linked to the collection of data, but as an ongoing ethical and methodological negotiation that requires a genuine commitment to meaningful participation of children in research.

From Voice to Action

- Authenticity is demonstrated not only by the stories we collect, but by what changes because of them.
- If we listen without acting, we risk silencing the very voices we set out to amplify.
- Real impact means letting pupil voice shape decisions, policies, and practice (this is very challenging!).

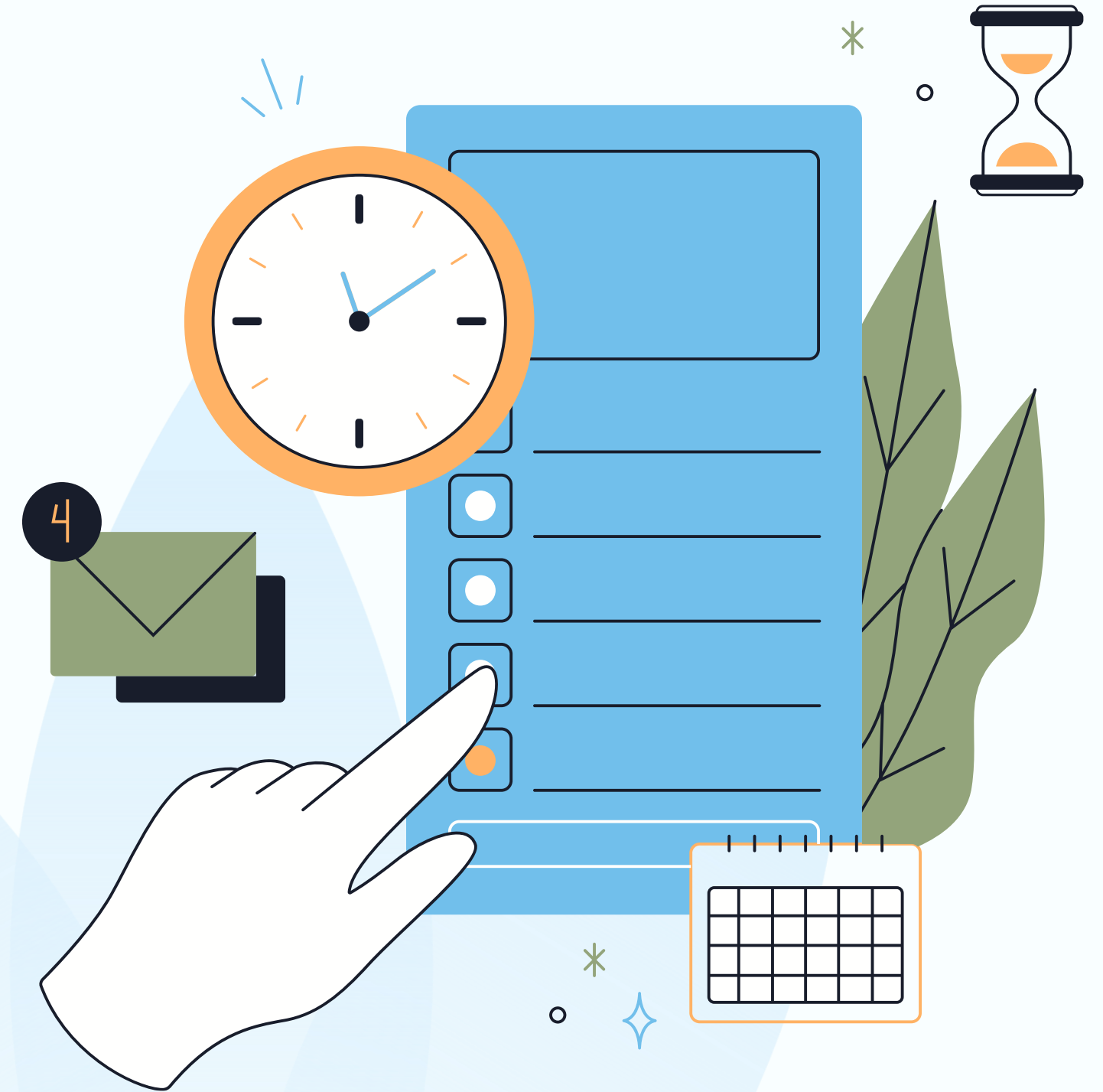


Model of Inclusive Epistemology for Children's Participation in Research (IECPR)



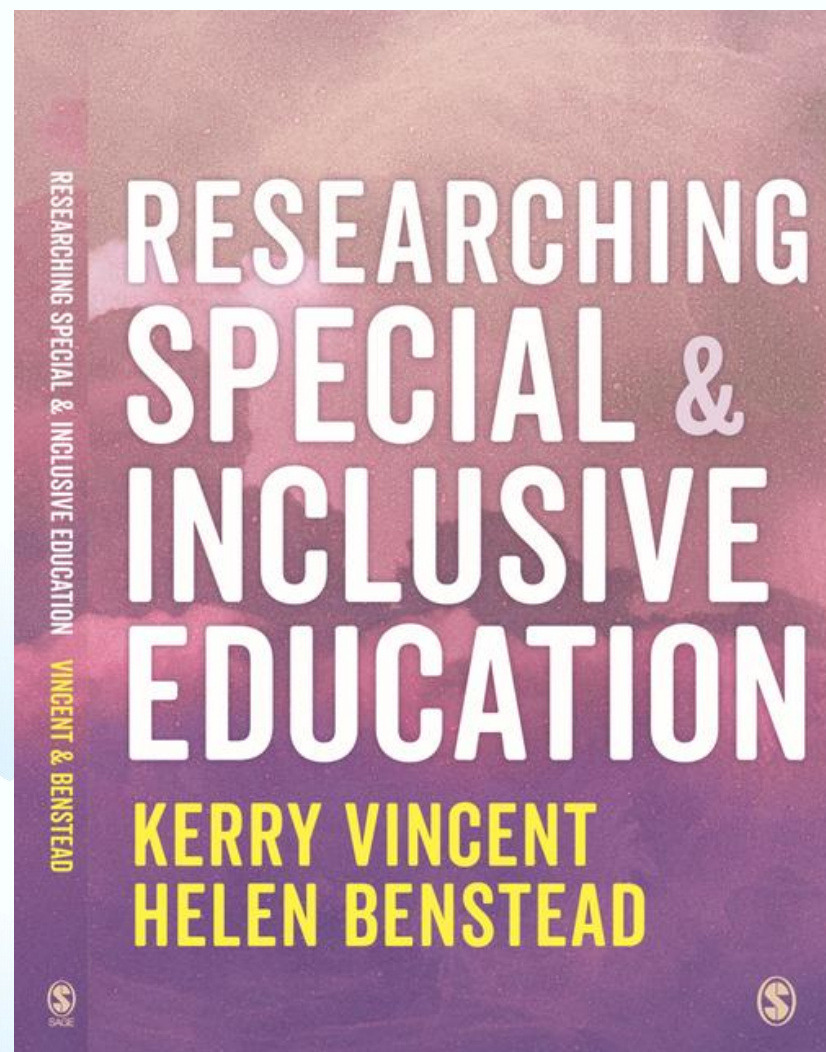
Hear my Story: Impact and Momentum

- Research publications advancing the field of pupil voice and digital storytelling.
- Growing school and health partnerships embedding Hear my Story in practice.
- Northern Accelerator Executive into Business funding secured.
- Spin-out journey underway, bringing the approach to wider audiences.

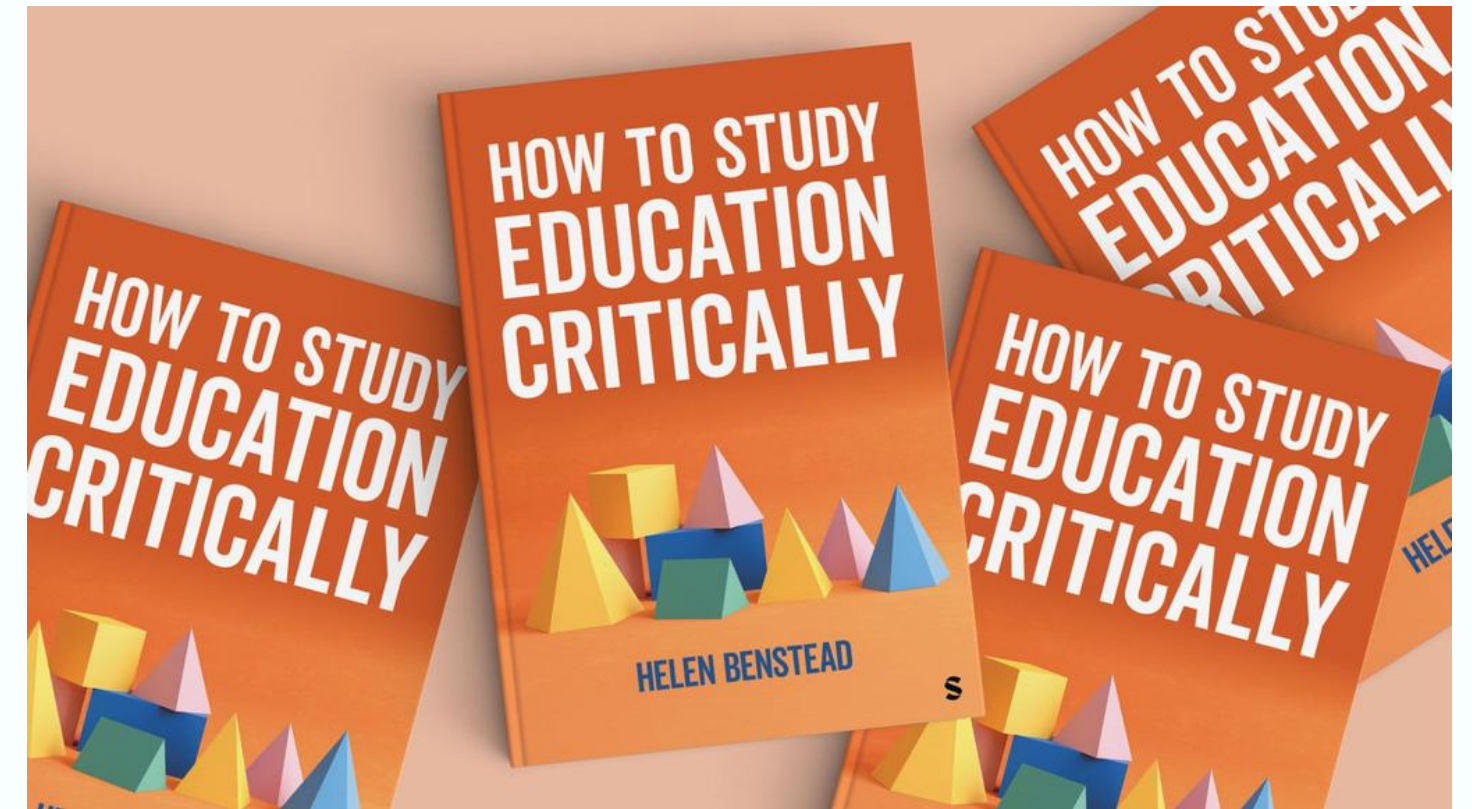


Interested in learning more?

‘Researching Special and Inclusive Education’ provides a practical introduction to the key theories, debates and research methods that shape special and inclusive education. Designed for students and practitioners, it supports readers to critically engage with research evidence and develop the skills needed to undertake their own educational research.



Coming Soon



‘How to Study Education Critically’ is a practical guide for Education students that develops the critical reading, writing and analytical skills needed for academic success and professional practice. The book supports readers to evaluate evidence, construct balanced arguments, undertake educational research, and apply critical thinking to contemporary issues including AI in education

Publication date of 10th October 2026

Final Reflection

‘Sometimes I don’t have friends. I’d like to have 100 friends but I just keep losing friends. I just don’t know how to get them.’

(7 year old boy, School in London)