# Are You Listening? I'm Me!

**The importance of children's rights has been acknowledged in national and international legislation. However, educational systems are often slow to listen to children's voices, particularly to children with social, emotional and/or behavioural difficulties (SEBD). This article draws on preliminary findings from research conducted between 2008 and 2011 with students identified with SEBD in mainstream schools in Ireland. The pertinent issues with respect to mainstream schools which provided the impetus for this study include: the policy of inclusion, challenging behaviour, and 'pupil voice'. The most significant themes which have emerged from the data from preliminary analysis are: positive relationships for students especially with teachers, 'attachment' or a sense of belonging within school, leadership and support for initiatives and strategies within the hierarchy of the school, particularly from the principal.**

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## INTRODUCTION

This article draws on a pupil voice research (PVR) project, consulting a sample group of young people, all of whom had been identified with social, emotional and/or behavioural difficulties (SEBD), from primary and post-primary mainstream education. The aim of the study was to determine the impact on the participants of having their 'voice' heard and being listened to as well as being encouraged to become 'active agents' in transforming their experience of school. The preliminary findings as well as the rationale for the study provide the focus of this discussion, within which, having a 'voice' suggests having also a "legitimate perspective and opinion, being present and taking part, and/or having an active role in decisions about and implementation of educational policies and practice" (Holdsworth, 2000, cited in Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 362).

During one of the earlier interviews conducted with potential participants for this research, an eleven-year-old boy gave an insightful account of what it was like to

have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), "on good days and bad days...". He finished his interview with this slightly defiant yet proud statement, "I'm me!" His words were adopted as a name for this study. *'I'm Me'* became an acronym for *'Inclusive Methods in Mainstream Education'* with the implicit reminder of the uniqueness of every participant.

## CONTEXT AND RATIONALE FOR THIS STUDY

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989) has influenced the growing recognition of the importance of children's rights, both nationally and internationally (Roche, 1999; Shevlin and Rose, 2003, 2008; Leitch, Lundy, Clough, Galanouli and Garner, 2005; Lundy, 2007; Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). The UNCRC sought to challenge and improve the treatment of children by affirming their need for 'special consideration' enshrining a number of rights of particular significance to this study:

- Article 12: Children's right to express their views
- Article 23: Children's right to special care, education and training, regardless of disability
- Article 28: Children's right to a primary education
- Article 29: Children's education should develop each child's personality, talents and abilities to the fullest.

At the time of writing only two countries, Somalia and the United States of America, had yet to ratify this treaty. Many of the countries which ratified it already have drafted or amended legislation to draw upon principles in relation to children in their respective states. Accordingly, Ireland's ratification of the treaty in September 1992 subsequently led to the publication of a ten-year National Children's Strategy (NCS) (Ireland, 2000); the establishment of thirty-four Comhairle na nÓg throughout the country who elect representatives to Dáil na nÓg; the creation of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children and the appointment of a Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. This was elevated to the status of a senior ministry, Minister for Children, by the coalition Government in March 2011. With these developments Ireland has made a clear commitment to the rights of children and demonstrated that commitment in the vision of the NCS which advocates, "An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own" (Ireland, p. 5).

Within educational research and reform, the issue of 'pupil voice' is not a new phenomenon. Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) point out that there was vigorous

pursuit of PVR in the late 1960s and 1970s, which was "driven by the desire to build a fuller understanding of life in classrooms and schools" (p. 3). However, despite yielding evidence that pupil voice had an important contribution to make, "there was no general expectation, as there is now, that the data would be fed back to teachers and pupils as a basis for informed action" (p. 21). Since the 1990s there has been steadily increasing interest in the involvement and voice of young people in educational research in the United States (Kozol, 1991; Weis and Fine, 1993; Levin, 1994), the United Kingdom (Rudduck, Chaplain and Wallace, 1996; Fielding and Bragg, 2003; Flutter and Rudduck, 2004; Leitch et al., 2005), and Ireland (Kenny, McNeela, Shevlin and Daly, 2000; Lynch and Lodge, 2002; Shevlin and Rose, 2008). The voice of children is central to the ongoing seven year National Longitudinal Study of Children, *Growing Up in Ireland* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2007).

It is difficult to find a comprehensive international definition in the literature for SEBD. In Ireland, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) uses the term to refer to:

> *...difficulties which a pupil or young person is experiencing which act as a barrier to their personal, social, cognitive and emotional development. These difficulties may be communicated through internalising and/or externalising behaviour* (Department of Education and Skills (DES) 2010, p. 4).

The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS, 2009-2010) estimate that one in ten children and adolescents suffer from mental health disorders and that the prevalence of these disorders in young people is increasing over time. Exact figures for children in mainstream education with SEBD are currently unavailable as statistics from the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) include only those students who have been allocated resource hours. As an umbrella term, SEBD encompasses a broad spectrum of difficulties including depression, eating disorders, neurosis, childhood psychosis, attention deficit disorder/ADHD, oppositional defiant disorder and conduct disorder. The scale of behaviours may present as internalising (shy, withdrawn and introverted) through to externalising (hyperactive, disruptive and in some cases, aggressive).

Although there is evidence that student behaviour has not deteriorated to any large extent in recent years (Steer, 2009), there is still recognition that most schools experience some form of disruptive behaviour (National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS), 2010, p. 2).The Report of the Task Force on Student Behaviour in Second Level Schools, *School Matters,* acknowledges that although

challenging behaviour is containable and amenable to correction in the majority of schools in Ireland, "the troubling reality is that there are schools in the system where teaching and learning are severely curtailed by disruptive student behaviour" (Department of Education and Science, 2006, p. 6). The NBSS was established in response to the report in 2006 "with a brief to provide support to those schools experiencing persistent and serious disruptive student behaviour" (NBSS, p. V). The objective of this research study was to elicit from a sample group of participant pupils with SEBD, their views on the experience of school as well as suggestions from them in order to generate interventions and strategies to improve engagement and positive behaviour.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Tangen (2009) contends that with the engagement of student voice, comes the potential to improve teacher-pupil alliances and the quality of school life which may empower marginalised pupils. However, she acknowledges that it is evident from the literature (e.g. Clark, McQuail, and Moss, 2003; Tangen, 2008, both cited in Tangen, 2009), that some groups of children and young people are seldom given a voice, specifically children under the age of five, children with disabilities and children from ethnic minorities (Tangen, p. 2). Of particular relevance to the motivation for this research is the realisation that there have been many studies focusing on the perceptions of pupils in mainstream education but very few have focused on pupils with SEBD (Davies, 2005; Cefai and Cooper, 2010). This is in spite of evidence which shows that the empowerment of students with SEBD can contribute to the resolution and prevention of some of the associated difficulties experienced by these students in school (Kroeger, Burton, Comarata, Combs, Hamm, Hopkins and Kouche, 2004; Norwich and Kelly, 2006; Leitch and Mitchell, 2007; Cefai and Cooper). Specifically, the findings of a small scale study conducted in Maltese post-primary schools indicated that providing students with SEBD with the opportunity to have a voice resulted in improved teacher-pupil relationships, enhanced interest and participation in school activities, resulting in more positive social and academic behaviours (Cefai and Cooper).

Wearmouth (2004) draws on the British White Paper, '*Excellence for All Children: Meeting Special Educational* Needs', to illustrate the concerns related to extreme examples of disaffection and failure as experienced by some students with SEBD:

> *The cost to society more widely of failure to tackle these problems is higher still, both in terms of reduced economic contribution in adult life and, for*

*some, of criminal activity and prison* (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 1997, p. 78).

Wearmouth concludes that considering what can happen if we fail to address the potential "problems" for disaffected students and their non-engagement with education, it is particularly important to determine the perspective of these students on themselves and their experience of the learning environment (p. 7). Davies (2005) has similar concerns, pointing out that "research suggests that listening to what these pupils have to tell us holds the key to subsequent action to help combat social exclusion" (p. 299). Cefai and Cooper (2010) reinforce this necessity, confirming that students with SEBD often feel excluded, victimised and abused within an educational system that "labels them as antisocial, deviant and failures" (p. 194). They agree that it is important to elicit the voices of these students but suggest that rather than being 'objects' of the research process, students should be partners. This is a view which is shared by Shevlin and Rose (2003), who point out that "the focus has been on doing research **on** or **about** children rather than engaging them fully in the investigative process" (pp. 4-5).

The impact of positive relationships on the experience of pupils in schools has been identified as significant in the literature. An Irish report, C*hildren's Understanding of Well-Being* (Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith, 2005) elicited contributions from children through the medium of pictures and photography. It identified the centrality of interpersonal relationships across all the age groups targeted in both primary and post-primary schools. Leitch and Mitchell (2007), similarly used visual images as the main method of data collection and found that the single biggest issue was "the differing degrees of basic trust between staff and students and how this manifested in students' feelings of disengagement" (p. 67). Sellman (2009) conducted research in a special school for boys with SEBD in the UK. The conclusions of his data collection are illuminating, "The students' key point was that it does not matter what "tool" (their word) a teacher has at their disposal (reward, sanction, restraint), if the relationship is poor this tool can be misused. Hence, it was less important to modify the reward system/behaviour policy and much more important to address the issue of relationships" (p. 42). Sellman points out that these findings are consistent with previous studies in this area (Willis, 1977; Garner, 1993; Pear and Garner, 1996; Pear, 1997; Wise, 1999; 2000; Pomeroy, 2000; Jahnukainen, 2001; Harris, Vincent, Thompson and Toalster, 2006, all cited in Sellman, 2009, p. 42), which highlight the importance pupils placed on relationships as factors in their engagement with school and its curriculum. Also, he points out that similar to these studies, feedback from the student research group indicated that their attitude was not anti-educational or

even anti-discipline. Rather, they request clarity, consistency, inclusivity and good quality relationships.

The participants in Cefai and Cooper's 2010 study referred to the significance of caring relationships with particular teachers and the power of such relationships in realigning their development towards more positive pathways (p. 193). The fact that pupils with SEBD or indeed pupils who are labelled "disruptive" consider fairness and respect from their teachers as greatly important is frequently highlighted in the literature (Getzels and Smilansky, 1983; Scarlett, 1989; Garner, 1993; Davies, 2005; Cruddas, 2007).

Young people want to be heard. When given the opportunity to respond in a survey which asked them to describe the kind of school they would like, the fourth most popular response from 15,000 students in England was "a listening school" (Rudduck and Demetriou, 2003, p. 277). One of the main findings of a research project conducted on behalf of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People was that not having a say in the decisions made about them was the single most important issue to children in Northern Ireland (Kilkelly, Kilpatrick, Lundy, Moore, Scraton, Davey, Dwyer and McAlister, 2004, p. xxii). Similarly, in a study conducted in the Republic of Ireland to determine children's experiences of participation and decision-making in Irish hospitals, the children expressed "strong" desires to have their voices heard in relation to decisions about matters that affected them and their bodies (Coyne, Hayes, Gallagher and Regan, 2006, p. 4). These research findings are in keeping with the first goal of the NCS, which states that "children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity" (Ireland, 2000, p. 11).

Significantly, the voices of some pupils are seldom sought, in particular, those of children with SEBD. In much of the literature, children are acknowledged as having an expert role with respect to the knowledge and understanding of what it is like to be a student in a particular school (Cooper, 1996; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; Gersch, 2001; Leitch et al., 2005; Rose and Shevlin, 2010). For that reason, this research study is based on a 'bottom up' approach to ascertain directly from the pupils their views on what may facilitate their engagement and help to prevent disaffection and social exclusion. When asked, children express the wish to be heard.

**METHODOLOGY**

The pilot study for this research began in one primary school in October 2008. The main project involved three more schools (one primary and two post-primary) all

of which had been contacted and agreed to participate by Christmas 2008. Consent forms were sent to a list of pupils identified with assessments of (S)EBD or emotional/severe emotional disturbance by the learning support/special needs co-ordinator or team in each school. Between January and March 2009, preliminary interviews were conducted with all the target pupils and written consent for inclusion in the research returned and received. In total, thirty-four pupils, twenty-four boys and ten girls, consented to participate. One student transferred to a different school in January 2010 and consequently left the programme.

The research design incorporated a combination of ethnographic and narrative case studies. Data collection methods were discussed and agreed with the pupils before commencement of what became known as the '*I'm Me'* Programme and included:

- regular one to one interviews/meetings with all pupils
- focus group meetings with two groups of students at post-primary level between 2009 and 2011
- creative workshops (sculpture, music, painting/drawing, role play/drama)
- periods of observation of all pupils in class or school break areas/playgrounds.

The participating students were directly involved in the design and implementation of interventions or strategies that were employed during the year. With the exception of the facilitation of the original creative workshops, the activities were generated from either their one to one conversations during interview or the focus group sessions with their peers. Some of the most successful and popular ideas were:

- the use of an egg timer in one primary school to help a student complete his tasks in class on time
- *My PAD* – a 'cool' variation on a Positive Aims Diary which records effort, success and positive comments only. The contractual language in the diary is composed from the voice of the pupil and asks the teacher to "observe me achieving my aims" while promising "to try my best...". The cover of the diary is a colourful depiction of a mobile phone with APPs
- Presentations to classmates and teachers of art work, music and/or drama from creative workshops

- Chill Out/Time Out cards or Buddy Time Out (titles varied from school to school) used when a student needed to calm down or if s/he felt very anxious
- A mentoring programme between senior and junior students with SEBD in the post-primary schools, all of whom were participating in the programme
- Team building workshops with their respective class groups co-ordinated and organised by the students on the programme.

The final focus group meetings were conducted in May 2011 to discuss, interpret and analyse emergent themes from data that had been collected over the duration of the programme. The purpose of those meetings is in keeping with the conceptual framework of this research which both privileges and respects the voices of the pupil participants and recognises and respects their unique insights as experts within their own experience (Cooper, 1996; James et al., 1998; Gersch, 2001; Leitch et al., 2005; Rose and Shevlin, 2010). It is essential to avoid an interpretation of what children say that is obscured by adult defined conditions and beliefs as there is evidence in the literature that children and young people interpret the world and the culture of their school quite differently from adults (Fielding, 2004; Leitch and Mitchell, 2007; Shallcross, Robinson, Pace and Tamoutseli, 2007). If we are to 'listen authentically' then we must also be in a position to 'present authentically' and therefore it is important that an attempt to understand or indeed interpret the views of children is conducted with *their* support and approval as otherwise it would be too easy to transpose 'adult' rationality and inference. This further reinforces the necessity to involve the student participants as partners in this research at every juncture including the process of analysis. Listening authentically requires subsequent affirmation from the child that what has been heard is interpreted as it was intended to be received. This necessitates more than listening but rather, a shared experience of understanding and research between researcher and the participants in this study. "The best form of interpretation/analysis, and that most consistent with the philosophy underpinning student voice projects, is to engage the help of the participants with this task" (Morgan, 1997, cited in Sellman, 2009, p. 42).

**PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND EMERGENT THEMES**

The most significant implication of the programme to date has been the acknowledgement by students that apart from the obvious enjoyment of activities they might not normally have had the opportunity to partake in, what really mattered most was that they were listened to – they had somebody to speak to and

they eventually believed that they were being heard. It is significant to emphasise 'eventually', as with some students it took quite a lot of perseverance and patience to reach a point where they believed that anybody would want to hear what they had to say or that the process was "for real".

The mentoring programme was enjoyed by the junior students who liked being paired with a student they could identify with, especially when that student could relate to similar challenges and difficulties s/he had experienced. Most of the senior students were in fifth year Leaving Certificate Applied groups when they became mentors and their co-ordinators commented on how they took their positions as mentors and role models very seriously. One boy told his younger mentee:

> *There's nothing you can think of doing that I didn't do. I was everyone's nightmare. I'm not saying I'm an angel or anything now, but I'm still here an' I'm ok. Believe me, if I can make it, you can* (Niall, 17 years old).

The emergent themes from the research to date have been in line with international literature on PVR and especially research with students with SEBD. The most prominent is the importance of positive relationships with teachers (Pomeroy, 2000; Davies, 2005; Sellman, 2009; Cefai and Cooper, 2010) the significance of which has already been highlighted here. A number of students began the process by talking about how much they hated or resented their teachers. In some cases, after we were able to address and break down attitudes on both sides of the relationship, the students were very quick to admit that it greatly improved their overall experience of school. Other themes which have emerged are the importance of 'attachment' to school (Smith, 2006; Cooper, 2008), being part of a group and identifying with it and/or with the school, "knowing someone has my back" (Brian, 12 years old). In some cases, group membership led students (initiated by their own interventions) to more inclusive activities with classmates outside the '*I'm Me*' group. One of the participating schools has extended the co-ordination of some of the activities to include any student who feels they would benefit from them. At present, *My PAD* is open to all students and the mentoring programme now has three variations, including models which comprise volunteers from parents and teaching staff.

A final significant theme which has emerged is the importance of 'leadership' in the school (Shevlin and Flynn, 2011). Pupil voice work cannot be realised as an authentic or consultative process unless it is met with some form of acknowledgement that can precipitate real change or transformative action. Taking a 'bottom up' approach to elicit the views of students can lead to

considerable insight into their experience of school and may consequently generate positive strategies, instigated with the co-operation of the students, as has been the experience of this research. However, just as the provision of opportunities to 'voice' requires an authentic 'listening' forum, a 'bottom up' approach equally requires a 'top down' response. Where school leaders, including the special needs co-ordinator, year heads, the school guidance counsellor and most especially the principal, have become involved with the process in this project, the experience of attitudinal change from students towards teaching staff and vice versa has had the most impact. However, facilitating "a coherent institutional commitment" (Fielding and Rudduck, 2002), necessitates an obligation to promote demonstrable and ultimately, "political" change.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper has provided an interim account of the '*I'm Me*' Programme, a pupil research project designed to listen to the voices of children with SEBD at both primary and post-primary level in mainstream education. The importance of children's rights has been acknowledged in national and international legislation. However, educational systems are often slow to listen to children's voices, especially those with SEBD. The experience of the '*I'm Me*' Programme across four schools has attempted to redress this imbalance and a number of practical changes and important themes emerged from the research. These included:

• Practical ideas to support increased student engagement in activities which emerged from the student participants
• Increased student enjoyment resulting from higher levels of student engagement
• A student mentoring system.

Among the important themes to emerge from the work were:

• The very real importance to students of 'being listened to'
• The development of more positive relations with teachers
• The positive outcomes from attachment to a 'group' and ultimately to the school
• The importance of leadership within schools, particularly leadership from 'the top'
• A 'bottom up' approach to problem solving or eliciting views from students requires a 'top down' response.

Further analysis of this study will incorporate feedback and interpretation from more recent focus groups which involved pupils from the '*I'm Me*' Programme in order to ensure that the final interpretation is as authentic as possible and avoid ***adult***eration of the voice of the child.

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