**Keys to engagement: a case study exploring the participation of autistic pupils in**

**educational decision-making at school**

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## Abstract

**Background**: the UNCRC (1989) established the importance of listening to children's views globally. In England, seeking the views of pupils with special educational needs and disability about their education, and involving them in decision-making, has been mandatory since 2015. Autistic children's views and experiences are particularly underrepresented in this context.
**Aims:** to provide a detailed, exploratory analysis of practices that enable autistic pupils to participate in educational decision-making; and to generate new knowledge about pupil participation in a school context, using the Framework for Participation (Black-Hawkins, 2010) as an analytical frame.
**Sample:** Four male pupils aged 11-15, with autism spectrum diagnoses, and 11 staff members from a specialist, independent school took part in this case study.
**Methods:** Observations were made of pupils in lessons, and pupils completed a photo-voice activity focusing on where they felt 'most listened to' in the school. Staff members participated in semi-structured interviews.
**Results:** A range of practices supported pupils' participation in everyday decision-making, underpinned by a respectful and positive culture led by the senior management team. The focus was on what learners can do, and how they make decisions to facilitate achievement. Pupils and staff developed mutually respectful relationships, within which boundaries were negotiated and compromises offered. Flexibility through decision making was provided within the timetabling and content of the curriculum. Pupils' special interests and expertise were valued as 'keys' to supporting their engagement.
**Conclusions:** These insights provide a tool for reflection by educators and Educational Psychologists for considering how they might promote the participation of autistic pupils in different educational contexts.

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**Background**

Children and young people on the autism spectrum[1] represent a large proportion of pupils who require additional support from schools and other services. 2.9% of the pupil population in England (253,680 pupils) have a 'statement' or Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), with 28.2% of pupils having a primary need of autism; the most common area of need for pupils with an EHCP (Department for Education, 2017). Estimates of UK prevalence suggest that 1.1% of the adult population are on the autism spectrum, however a recent study in Northern Ireland suggests prevalence as high as 2.5% among children aged 4 – 15 years (Information and Analysis Directorate, 2017). The prevalence rate is a concern because outcomes for autistic children and young people are often poor, with mental health and school exclusion identified as some of the priority areas for intervention (Brede, Remington, Kenny, Warren, & Pellicano, 2017; Crane, Adams, Harper, Welch, & Pellicano, 2018). Supporting autistic pupils in education settings is therefore an important and timely issue.

**Importance of pupil participation**

To effectively support autistic pupils, school practices should be influenced by the views of the child or young person. This is not only an argument advocated by research on the benefits of pupil participation for pupils, families and practitioners (Hill, 2014; Mager & Nowak, 2012; Noyes, 2005; Pedder & McIntyre, 2006), but by legislation mandating the participation of children and young people in decision-making. For example, The Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Code of Practice (Department for Education & Department of Health, 2015) states that schools and local authorities in England must ensure that pupils with SEND and their families participate in the decisions that affect

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[1] In line with the preferences of the UK autism community, the terms 'on the autism spectrum' or 'autistic person' will be used rather than ' person with autism' to represent identity first language; for further discussion see Kenny et al., (2016).

them, and are given the tools to participate as fully as possible. Consequently, the onus is on practitioners to identify the means in which to enable their participation. While the Code of Practice refers to the participation of pupils in decisions regarding their support, care and educational provision broadly (e.g. transition practices), it does not mandate that pupils are consulted regarding how they like to work and which types of work they do in school. However, the features of educational provision that matter most to pupils with SEND often relate to everyday experiences in the classroom, and with teachers, for example, where to sit in the classroom and how work should be presented and explained (Lewis et al., 2007; Hummerstone, 2018). Understanding such features is crucial for helping pupils to feel included and to provide supportive and enabling teaching environments, including around transitions (Hoy et al., 2018). Also, pupil views often differ from teachers and so it is important to access pupil views directly wherever possible (Hummerstone, 2018).

**Research on pupil participation**

Research on the participation of pupils with SEND in decision-making tends to focus either on disabled pupils, encompassing a wide range of needs (Cavet & Sloper, 2004; Franklin & Sloper, 2006, 2009), or pupils in specific groups, such as those with social, emotional, and mental health needs (Kennedy, 2015). In this context, pupils on the autism spectrum warrant particular attention as they may be especially vulnerable to exclusion from decision-making. For example, autistic pupils are less likely to participate in decision-making than pupils with other additional needs (Griffin et al., 2014; Shogren & Plotner, 2012; Wei et al., 2016). Whilst this finding relates specifically to attending and actively participating in transition planning, it suggests that vigilance is required to ensure that autistic pupils are not excluded from other types of decisions.

A systematic review on the participation of autistic pupils in educational decision-making (Zilli, 2018) showed that the evidence is dominated by large-scale survey data and/or a focus on formal processes such as transition planning or annual reviews (Bell et al., 2017; Franklin & Sloper, 2006, 2009; Griffin et al., 2014; Hatfield et al., 2017; Horton, 2015; Shogren & Plotner, 2012; Wei et al., 2016). These studies indicate the numbers and characteristics of autistic pupils involved and the factors that enable or inhibit their participation, but they do not investigate any impact on outcomes from pupils' participation. Case studies have also focused on making choices in the classroom (Barry & Burlew, 2004; Mechling et al., 2016; Newman et al., 2002; Peterson et al., 2001). However, this research uses experimental designs and is underpinned by a deficit-focused view of autism; namely, a desire to reduce challenging behaviour that is deemed problematic by others, rather than to enable autistic pupils to participate in decision-making in a more inclusive way.

Overall, there is limited evidence about whether and how autistic pupils take part in day-to-day decisions in schools, such as what work to do or with whom they collaborate in the classroom. There is also little detailed, contextualised knowledge based on the perspectives of those who participate, and what happens as a result of their participation. Further, more needs to be understood with regards to the educational practices that support and promote feelings of inclusion, and therefore, enable access to the curriculum.  Such knowledge is vital for developing a richer and more informed understanding of where and how children's views can be heard effectively, especially for those who are considered some of the hardest to reach (Winstone, Huntington, Goldsack, Kyrou, & Millward, 2014). The current study therefore sought to provide a detailed, exploratory analysis of practices that enable autistic pupils to participate in

decisions about their education; and to generate new knowledge about pupil participation in a school context, to address the following research questions:

(1)     What school practices enable autistic pupils to participate in decision-making about their school experiences?

(2)     How are the views of autistic pupils used to inform decisions about their school experiences?

(3)     When do autistic pupils feel their voices have been heard?

**Methodology**

**Design**

In seeking to provide an in-depth understanding of one phenomenon in a real world context, a case study approach was taken that was both exploratory and instrumental (Thomas, 2016). An important part of this approach is polyhedronation: the use of multiple methods of data collection, from multiple perspectives, to examine the case in depth (Thomas, 2016). Consequently, the perspectives of autistic pupils, and a range of education professionals in different roles, were sought using creative and semi-structured methods over 5 months. The case is at the level of the school.

**The case school**

The school provides specialist provision for pupils between the ages of 8-16 with a range of needs including social, emotional and mental health and learning difficulties. It is located in the south of England, across three sites, and has approximately fifty pupils on roll. The school caters for children of both primary/elementary and secondary/high school age, whose needs have not been met in a mainstream setting or pupil referral unit. Approximately 50% of pupils on roll have an autism diagnosis. The school describes their curriculum as 'progressive and broad' to cater for the varying needs of their pupils. Within the secondary/high school stages of education (Key Stages 3 and 4

in the UK), students follow the full national curriculum as well as vocational courses. Class sizes are small, with approximately 2 to 5 pupils per class and a high staff to pupil ratio. Staff have different roles in the school such as senior leadership, pastoral support, subject teachers, tutors and occupational therapy assistants. The school was graded 'outstanding' which is the highest category possible, in its most recent Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspection report.

**The analytical frame**

According to Thomas (2016), every case study should have an analytical frame for interpreting the data. This study applied the Framework for Participation (Black-Hawkins, 2010, 2014; Florian et al., 2016) which is designed to be used by practitioners and researchers to reflect on the school practices that facilitate participation in school life. The Framework relates to four aspects of participation: access, collaboration, achievement and diversity (described in detail in Florian et al., 2016, pp. 61-69). This is also captured by the definition of participation used by the authors, and adopted here:

> Participation in education involves going beyond access. It implies learning alongside others and collaborating with them in shared lessons. It involves active engagement with what is learnt and taught, and having a say in how education is experienced. But participation also involves being recognised for oneself and being accepted for oneself. I participate with you, when you recognise me as a person like yourself, and accept me for who I am (Booth, 2002, p. 2, cited in Black-Hawkins, 2010).

**Methods**

**Recruitment**

The school was identified through academic staff at the University of Southampton based on an existing research-practice partnership, and knowledge that the pupil population would meet the aims of the research. The Head Teacher was contacted and procedures regarding consent, data collection and debriefing explained. Autistic pupils were recruited through the senior leadership team via opportunity sampling. The inclusion criteria were that the pupils had to have been attending the school for at least one academic year, be between 11-16 years of age (high school age), and have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as identified in their EHCP. There were no exclusion criteria. School staff were recruited through snowball sampling, where a staff member or pupil put the researcher in contact with another potential participant.

**Participants**

The views and perspectives of four male autistic pupils are at the heart of this study (see Table 1 for demographic information). While an effort was made to recruit equal numbers of males and females to the project, given the higher prevalence of autistic boys to girls, both diagnostically and within the school, this process resulted in no autistic females selected / consented for inclusion. All four pupils had a diagnosis of autism or Asperger's syndrome, provided by the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service before the introduction of the DSM-5 (APA, 2013), and could all communicate using speech. The pupils were White British and/or European with multiple additional needs, including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), attachment difficulties, Tourette's syndrome, and anxiety. One or more were also looked-after by the local authority, meaning that the responsibility of their care had been awarded by court-order to the local authority, acting in its social services capacity. To avoid the possibility of individual identification demographic details are aggregated in Table 1. The pupils

were all working towards completing their General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs). GCSEs are secondary school qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and are typically taken in core subjects (English, mathematics, science, and humanities) and optional subjects (e.g., psychology, religious studies, arts, etc.). Typically, students take a minimum of 5 GCSE subjects which are awarded on a grading scale.

Eleven staff members (8 female and 3 male) who knew the pupils well also participated, resulting in 3-4 staff perspectives per pupil. In some instances, the same member of staff provided data on more than one pupil. Table 2 shows participant numbers, staff roles, and the type of data collected.

***Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here***

**Data collection**

Data were collected between September 2017 and January 2018, using three main methods (see Zilli, 2018 for more details):

Observations: Pupils were observed in at least five different decision making contexts, including subject lessons and review meetings for behaviour plans. Each observation lasted a minimum of one hour and included at least three different subject lessons spanning different dates and times. The researcher made notes whilst interacting with pupils and staff, including the number of pupils and staff, lesson topic, atmosphere and room layout (following Robson & McCartan, 2016). Examples of decision-making in the classroom were noted using the words of pupils and staff. Field notes were typed on the computer for later analysis. All pupils were observed in at least two lessons before conducting the photo-elicitation activity (below) so as to increase familiarity between the pupil and the researcher. During the initial meeting with pupils, the researcher

asked them to select one lesson in which they wanted to be observed. This was often their favourite subject, providing a topic the researcher could engage them in to build rapport. Subsequent observations were then based on a range of factors: lessons available to see on the day of data collection, pupil preferences and staff recommendations.

Photo-elicitation:  The value of visual methods for supporting the contributions of children to research is well established (Fayette & Bond, 2017; Hill, 2014; Prosser & Loxley, 2008), and specifically, in using a photo-voice method with autistic pupils (Sheperd, 2015; Hill, 2014; Beresford 2004). Drawing on this research, each pupil was asked to photograph places or people where they felt listened to; some examples were given to pupils as a guide, such as a room, person or school subject. The activity took place in three stages: a meeting with the pupils to plan which photographs they wished to take in the school, a lesson in which to take the photographs, and an audio-recorded discussion of their photographs where they explained their choices. See Table 3 for further detail on the steps undertaken when collecting the data.

***Insert Table 3 about here***

Semi-structured interviews: Interviews with staff members took place at the school and focused on experiences and examples of pupil participation and decision-making. A topic guide was created with the flexibility to discuss in more detail any areas of interest. Interviews lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and were audio-recorded.

**Ethics**

Ethical review and approval was received from the ***redacted for anonymised review***.  All carers gave their written consent for pupils to participate; pupils gave

their assent. Staff members gave their written consent to be interviewed and have these audio-recorded. Written consent was also given by staff to have their photographs taken during the project. It was stressed in all consent and assent forms that confidentiality would be maintained with pseudonyms used in any written materials for the project, which was reiterated verbally.

**Data analysis**

Interview transcripts, field notes and photographs were analysed deductively using framework analysis, which is a method of systematically analysing qualitative data using a set of a priori codes, derived from theoretical concepts in the literature, research questions and/or topics in the dataset (Ritchie & Lewis, 2014; Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). Operational terms were first created for the sections of The Framework for Participation (Black-Hawkins, 2016): access, collaboration, achievement and diversity, each of which included several sub-codes. 'Other' categories were created for data that did not fit within the deductive codes. Trustworthiness of the coding manual was established by first applying it to the data from one pupil and the staff members linked to that pupil. New codes were created to accommodate important patterns in the data whilst some codes were collapsed; the revised manual was then applied to the entire dataset using NVivo 11 (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2018). Next, a matrix was created in a spreadsheet with a list of the participants and themes; data from every transcript, field note and photograph was then summarised for each theme.

**Results**

The findings are presented according to three main over-arching themes drawn from the Framework for Participation and based on their dominance within the data from multiple participant perspectives: <u>Access</u>: staying in the school and the classroom, access to the curriculum; <u>Achievement</u>: focusing on what learners can do and how they

make decisions to facilitate achievement; and <u>Diversity</u>: the recognition and acceptance of pupils by staff. Some themes, while related to the Framework, did not help to answer a research question, such as 'collaboration: students learning together in classrooms and members of staff learning together or beyond the school'. This provided insights into the practices that promoted or inhibited collaboration between pupils, or between staff members or staff members and parents/carers and staff but did not relate to decision-making with autistic pupils and is therefore not reported. A summary of the key practices identified and learning points for schools and Educational Psychologists (EPs) is included in Table 4.

***Insert Table 4 about here***

**Access: staying in the school and the classroom**

<u>Taking breaks</u> was a helpful strategy that enabled pupils to stay in the classroom. All pupils particularly valued this strategy and made decisions to use it in different ways: Noah often used the one-to-one room, David an outdoor area of the school, John the garden, and Jack the office of the Deputy Headteacher. The importance of breaks, and the opportunity to choose when and where to take breaks, was illustrated by photographs of each of these locations, which represented places around the school where pupils felt 'most listened to' (see Figure 1). Three pupils also described a positive change in emotional state after taking a break (timeout) from the lesson, as exemplified by David:

> *That's where I go for a timeout…it's nice out there… it just sorts out my mind a little bit so I can go back to the lesson with a better frame of mind*

Staff also commented on the benefits of the timeout system and how it was used:

*Before he would have a huge meltdown… huge, whereas now he can say actually I'm having time out… can I have timeout now and he'll take himself out and he'll come back in (Staff 6)*

***Insert Fig.1 about here***

The observations of pupils in lessons suggested that breaks were taken flexibly, and were pupil-led, rather than only through a timeout system where pupils physically left the classroom.  In two separate observations of John, he stated: "I can't think, I'm asleep". Staff responded by offering a compromise that acknowledged the needs of pupils, such as asking if they would like to take a short break before trying to commence work. Further comments from other staff suggested that flexibility was needed to allow pupils "to do what they need to do" in order to engage in the lesson:

*How can I… yell at a student for wandering around a room when he's got an ADHD diagnosis? I mean really?! …it's allowing them the ability to do what they need to do whilst also reining them in and reminding them that this is a classroom environment (Staff 5)*

Staff also argued that sometimes compromising physical presence in the classroom in favour of doing work was necessary to meet the needs of pupils. Another staff member who often worked with John on a one-to-one basis said:

*"… it's not regimented… you know they come in and they're feeling really distraught we don't say right that it's, go into class go do your work… we work around the children and their feelings" (Staff 6).*

However, when staff responded to pupil views, they also considered the context in which requests for breaks were made:

*"if it's a lesson he can normally stay in you're like let's just try this... give it a minute or two and then if he really can't engage and he asks for a timeout - you go" (Staff 8).*

"Compromise" was mentioned by all staff in relation to creating an environment that invited pupils to stay in lessons and/or do their work, particularly in cases where pupil choices were unrealistic. In the extract below, the compromise was around John's ideas for how to improve his lesson the next day. John's teacher felt that giving him the opportunity to discuss changes to the lesson would improve his behaviour:

*Staff 7:      I would also include him in the choices so today John you've had a pretty shocking day so tomorrow how can we improve it?      What do you think I can do to make your day better tomorrow? And I would say things like that*

*Researcher:          do you feel he responded well to that and could offer some suggestions to you for things to do?*

*Staff 7:      yeah they wouldn't always be reasonable or rational to which I'd go actually that's not gonna work but let's say what if I did this, this and this, that's a bit of a compromise… you're getting a bit of time to do this and I'm getting… you're doing the work that I want you to do and we're like thumbs up and he's like yeah why not. He'd agree to that and that would… I would find that would always work. It's that compromise… that working together.*

Many of the staff also talked about the importance of tapping into <u>pupil interests</u>. Staff referred to similar concepts to describe this such as finding "keys" (Staff 4) "hooks" (Staff 1) or "roots" (Staff 9) into what helps engage individual pupils. One teacher argued that by finding these "keys" pupils are encouraged to be more invested in the

school, which then reduces disruptive behaviour. For example, the pastoral support teacher talked about how Noah's badges (indicating achievements and representation on the school council) are important to him, and so a strategy that worked well with Noah was reminding him about setting a good example to other students, thereby encouraging him to return to a lesson.

**Access: to the curriculum**

This theme relates to practices that enabled pupil decision making regarding timetabling and extra-curricular activities. Staff members took a lead in arranging the timetables, however, they were subject to change dependent upon on the needs of pupils, and in some cases, pupil request. Participants suggested that changes to the timetable were also made when group dynamics were challenging:

> *Well I know that with him [David] being unhappy in the last tutor group he was in he obviously spoke to SLT [senior leadership team] and obviously they made the change for him to come to this tutor group 'cause obviously it was making him unhappy (Staff 10)*

Staff approached decisions about the timetable with flexibility and consideration of the views of pupils. However, one staff member discussed different strategies with a pupil to manage in class before deciding whether to make changes:

> *…it's a little bit of negotiation with him… 'you need to be trying this Noah'… try and give him another chance to be able to cope with the class (Staff 1)*

In terms of extra-curricular activities, all pupils talked about a club or role in the school which they enjoyed; for John it was the ICT club, for Noah the student council, for Jack the student council and ICT monitor, and for David the language club. The importance of these activities to pupils was demonstrated by their photographs and comments:

> *I've got the Spanish room which is where I like… I feel listened to… I spend a lot of*
>
> *time in there so yeah (David)*

Decisions about which extra-curricular activities pupils attended were made between staff and pupils. Sometimes new clubs were created because of pupil interests; in David's case the language club was created by the Spanish teacher because she noticed that David had an "intense interest" in languages which was not catered for in the current timetable. One teacher also said that the school wanted to send pupils the message that pupils are listened to by meeting their requests for activities (where feasible):

> *they've asked for more trips out to better engage their education… part of the*
>
> *school football team, they wanted to be taken seriously and play other schools so*
>
> *now that's happening…they're turning up every day, our attendance is brilliant and*
>
> *they know they have got a voice and they are listened to (Staff 3)*

The <u>school council</u> was identified as an important forum for pupil participation. Decisions about who joined the student council were made through a democratic process involving the whole school. However, staff commented that the process of democracy might not always be effective when votes do not result in a candidate. School council meetings were consistently scheduled, with a clear expectation that everyone attended. One teacher explained that in previous schools student councils were unsuccessful because meetings were not prioritised by staff:

> *I've been to different schools in a similar environment as this is where we started a*
>
> *student council and then because… not that staff didn't take it seriously but they*
>
> *didn't have the time to make sure that it was diarised so it wasn't on that*

*important list so it just got forgotten about and lost so the children just thought oh*

*well they don't care (Staff 3)*

The importance of the student council was echoed through comments from both Noah and Jack; Noah described his role as "the most important role in the school" and that he was "very determined to make sure that the council of this school is very fruitful", whilst Jack said: "it makes you feel important and you get your ideas listened to".


**Achievement: focusing on what learners can do, and how they make decisions to facilitate achievement.**

Lessons were designed to focus on the <u>strengths, interests and expertise</u> of pupils in the classroom. For two pupils, it was important to be able to direct the lesson in some way, whether this was through choosing resources or independently executing tasks. Noah spoke positively about his music lesson where he had the freedom to make choices:

*I've always really enjoyed the music room because you can…play whatever you*

*want… within reason… and you can just enjoy yourself, you don't have to really*

*worry about how I'm going to get like my As in Maths and English and everything*

*else… (Noah)*

Noah's comments suggest that music lessons are a subject where the content was led by pupil interest, and that this reduced the pressure to achieve, when 'achievement' was framed in terms of academic attainment. Another teacher described using "tutorial sheets" where pupils decided on art projects for the term. From the teacher's perspective, the engagement of pupils in her classroom was due to the pupils deciding on what to do in the lesson, decisions which would likely reflect their own interests and skills. One caveat with this practice was that some pupils may have been uncomfortable with having too much choice:

*… it kind of scared him for a little while but actually we sat down, did a brainstorm, each individual student decided what to make at the end of that term and Jack created the most amazing three-dimensional piece of sculptural work using random bits and pieces (Staff 5)*

This highlights that contributing to decision-making is a skill that needs to be learned rather than assumed, with additional guidance provided where needed. It was also recognised by staff that the degree to which pupils chose the content of lessons may vary from subject to subject because such flexibility may be more difficult to achieve within a more confined curriculum.

Practices that drew on pupil interests ranged from entirely pupil-led lessons and projects to specific tasks within the lessons, which required negotiation. There were also examples of situations where staff tapped into pupil interests to enable pupils to reach the goal of a lesson. John's tutor described "playing on" John's interests to help him make a blackcurrant dish during a food tech lesson:

*John actually hates fruit… but I managed to get him to use red and black currants…at first he would only use black currants but there weren't enough… his favourite colour is red so I played on that as well…just like all the different little things that he likes [that are red], he was like oh yeah, oh ok yeah fine we'll do it (Staff 8)*

**Diversity: mutual recognition and acceptance between pupils and staff**

This theme relates to the practices that promote <u>mutual relationships of acceptance and recognition</u> among staff and pupils. All of the pupils identified staff members who they felt listened to them at school. This was shown by photographs of different subject

teachers, tutors and members of the senior leadership team. Pupils identified a range of practices which helped them to feel listened to such as "sorting issues" (Jack and Noah), "listening to me when I struggle" (David), receiving "a hundred percent of the attention" (Noah), "giving advice" (David) and being a "friend" (John). David took eleven photographs of staff, the most photographs out of all four pupils highlighting the importance of those relationships for him.

Time staff spent with pupils influenced the quality of relationships for both David and Jack:

> *yeah well I definitely feel listened to by [teacher name]… I spend most of my time with her… she's been there from the start as well for me… (David)*
>
> *I usually speak to [first name, senior leadership team] every day about something…at least once a week, quite often …he usually speaks to me at all times (Jack)*

However, time spent together was not the only factor that pupils considered when thinking through whether they felt accepted and recognised by staff:

> *He hasn't been my tutor for too long, only for like a term and a half but I feel like we're kind of on the same level, he understands where I'm coming from… he knows what's happening and bless him… he's trying so hard to learn about Pokemon (Noah)*

All four pupils took photographs of members of the <u>senior leadership team</u>, and for three pupils, David, Noah and Jack, this represented one place where they felt most listened to within the school. There was a sense that one of the reasons for putting senior management in the 'most listened to' pile was to do with their status of power within the school. Jack said: "they can actually sort it out properly for me" which was

echoed by Noah who said: "yes 'cause obviously it's the big boss people… they're the ones who make the final decisions". Pupils described many changes to their school experiences after having had a discussion with senior management and that visits were not always about "sorting issues" but also an opportunity to talk. Noah said: "sometimes I just like going up there to just have a talk because it's rather relaxing and enjoyable".

Staff argued that it was also important for pupils to see them as human beings and in contexts other than the classroom to build positive relationships. Staff believed mutual acceptance and positive regard could be achieved by spending time in different contexts, which helped to promote this acceptance. For example, one teacher discussed researching computers, which Jack was "obsessed with" to "get that banter going" with him in her lessons. Other staff described making visits to the students' home (part of the school's residential facilities), where they were able to see pupils in a different context and learn about their interests:

> *When I get into their home they talk on their level… it's got nothing to do with me, I'm just there to look after them and we'll go to flip out, we'll go… you know do whatever they wanna do, play games and build a relationship and people actually see that I'm just a normal person, not just some teacher who walks around, I care for them you know. (Staff 2)*

Within the context of these positive relationships staff were clear that <u>managing expectations through explanation,</u> and being clear about boundaries, were important:

> *We are trying to meet your needs but if we don't meet your needs these are the reasons why and these are the reasons why you're best off where you are and to his credit, he [Noah] does take that on board (Staff 1)*

Comments from pupils suggested an awareness of staff perspectives, which could point to the effectiveness of this strategy. Jack said, for example:

> *I wondered today if it would be possible for uh me to go over to [site name] but it's not possible because there are too many students there… but I believe everyone is coming over here later.*

**Discussion**

The study aimed to identify the school-based practices that enabled autistic pupils to participate in decision-making about their school experiences; how their views were used by adults to inform decisions; and when autistic pupils felt their voices were heard. A key finding relating to school-based practices for enabling participation and how pupil views were used to inform decisions was that the curriculum and the systems within the school were flexible, which created opportunities for pupils to make decisions about how and when they learn. Practical examples included pupils contributing to and, in some cases, leading decisions about projects in lessons and the types of clubs organised by the school. The importance of extra-curricular activities to pupils, such as the student council and language club also highlighted the value placed on access to and appreciation of other forms of learning.  These practices are in line with recommendations from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2008), who argue that creating a flexible and diverse curriculum is vital to providing an equitable education system that is enticing and inclusive for all learners, thereby increasing the likelihood of more pupils staying in school. Given our research questions, it was not possible to determine whether the flexibility of the curriculum directly impacted on the academic attainment of the pupils. However, it was evident that pupils valued the flexibility to choose how and when they learned, and that they enjoyed the range of activities. As these pupils were previously excluded or at risk

of exclusion from educational settings and were now attending school full-time, our findings suggest that there was real value in taking such a flexible approach for the inclusion and engagement of these pupils.

The role of diversity in terms of recognition and acceptance of pupils by staff was evident in pupil and staff accounts. Pupils felt listened to by staff across the school, from tutors to members of the senior leadership team. This may have provided a relational context that facilitated the views of pupils to be heard, valued and acted upon. In the context of multi-professional partnerships, the quality of relationships affects the extent to which individuals feel able to speak with each other and value views that are different from their own (Lasker, Weiss, & Miller, 2001). This is in line with education research arguing that pupil–adult relationships are the primary vehicle for increasing pupil participation in decision-making, as relationships are proposed to influence what pupils are able to say and which voices are heard (Mannion, 2007). Pupils in the present study gave valuable insights into what staff did that helped them to feel heard, for example, "sorting issues" and taking time to value and learn about their interests. Schools could therefore begin by asking pupils what *they* consider to be important in developing relationships with staff.

The strong relationships reported by pupils and staff resonated with a 'partnership approach' to decision-making, as advocated by May (2004), where staff and pupils share the power in making decisions through negotiation, joint goals and reciprocal feedback. For example, one staff member asked a pupil what she could do differently to improve his day, which resulted in actions that reflected the ideas of both parties. This created an opportunity for the pupil to contribute to decisions about changes to his lesson, and

supported his continued engagement. Although it may be difficult to determine whether shared ownership was the catalyst for the positive outcome identified by staff in this example or the resultant compromise, these findings suggest that engaging pupils as partners in decision-making may be an effective approach to managing difficult situations in the classroom.

However, it is important to note that the laudable aim of asking pupils their views about their education may not be straightforward to implement in practice; staff suggested that making choices was unfamiliar territory for some pupils. A teacher's comment that one pupil "felt scared at first" about the prospect of deciding on the topic for the lesson, suggests that adults cannot assume that children and young people have the information and skills they need to make decisions. This argument is echoed in literature around decision-making with autistic pupils and disabled people (Fayette & Bond, 2017; Hatfield et al., 2017; Pellicano et al., 2014; Rix, Hall, Nind, Sheehy, & Wearmouth, 2009). For example, the autistic pupils in Hatfield's (2017) study identified that they were anxious about making decisions about their transition to post-secondary education and that they wanted clear information about the planning process. This suggests that adults should carefully consider what scaffolds need to be used to support autistic pupils to feel confident about making decisions about their education, and that such supports should be part of a more general approach within the school rather than confined to specific tasks, teachers, or activities.

Indeed, there was evidence that the decisions pupils made about their school experiences were part of the wider culture of the school rather than offered by staff as an intervention specific to autistic pupils. These practices supported decisions that

facilitated pupil access and achievement, especially in relation to focusing on the strengths and interests of the pupils and using these as 'keys to engagement'. This contrasts with approaches to choice-making interventions for autistic pupils which were designed as a behaviour management tool for specific learners in order to reduce challenging or difficult behaviours (Newman et al., 2002; Rispoli et al., 2013; Smeltzer et al., 2009). The leadership ethos of the school has been identified as one of the vital characteristics of inclusive schools that respect and value pupil views, and the current case-study school is a strong example of this in action (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). This underlines that good autism educational practice is, at its core, simply good educational practice, and has the potential to benefit all learners.

**Conclusions and limitations**

This is the first case study of a school with the aim of understanding the practices that enable autistic pupils to participate in everyday, informal decision-making within school. The findings are rich and detailed, supported through the use of multiple methods of data collection and perspectives. As a case study of one school, the data are not intended to be generalizable; indeed, that is not the point of taking a case study approach to understanding practice. Nevertheless, the principles that underpin the practices identified can be used as a reflection tool by educators and EPs for considering how they might promote the participation of autistic pupils in different educational contexts. In particular, mainstream schools may differ from special schools with regards to policy and practice, and future research could explore ways in which participation in decision making could be enabled in these contexts.

An important area for consideration is where the curriculum might be more flexible, and where opportunities could be created for pupils to directly influence the activities they do within school. Where possible, these practices should be considered within a whole-school approach rather than as a targeted intervention. When promoting decision making, practitioners should be mindful that some pupils may need support to consider and express their views. Accordingly, pupils may need additional information and guidance, both about available choices and potential processes involved with and/or consequences of their choices. Our findings highlight that a partnership approach to decision making may be helpful for creating actions that are agreeable to both staff and pupils. Finally, practitioners should consider asking pupils at their school about what teachers can do to help them feel heard, and think through processes to demonstrate that their voices and views have been listened to. Researchers could also extend this approach to contexts where the views and experiences of those in minority ethnic groups or those who use augmentative and assistive communication methods could be explored.

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Noah – one-to-one room


Jack – Deputy Headteacher's office


John – garden (individual removed)


David – outdoor area

Figure 1:  Photographs pupils took of places where they felt listened to; for each pupil one photograph was a location in the school where they take 'timeouts'. The person was removed in the photograph taken by John to protect anonymity.

Table 1: Pupil demographics

| Pseudonym | Gender | Age | Joined school | EHCP* | Diagnosis |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Noah | Male | 14 | 2014 | Yes | Asperger Syndrome |
| Jack | Male | 13 | 2015 | Yes | Asperger Syndrome |
| John | Male | 11 | 2015 | Yes | Autism |
| David | Male | 15 | 2015 | Yes | Autism |

* Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) are statutory documents in England that provide information about the child's educational, health, and social care needs as well as provisions that are mandatory for meeting those needs.

Table 2: Summary of data collected from participants

| | Methods | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pupil | Photos taken | Observed lessons | Staff interviews relating to the pupil |
| Noah | One to one room, Juniors' room, Maths room, Meeting room, Senior management office, Music room, Pokemon, Friend, Tutor | Science, Maths, Outdoor Ed. | N=3: Pastoral support (Staff 1), one to one/PSHE (Staff 2), SENCo (Staff 3) |
| Jack | Asst Head, Asst Head's office, Tutor, Office, Meeting room (site 1), Meeting room (site 2), HT | English, Enrichment, Food Tech | N= 3: Asst Head (Staff 4), art teacher (Staff 5), SENCo (Staff 3) |
| John | Toys, Food made, Food tech teacher, IT teacher, Asst Head, Art teacher | PSHE, Maths, Food Tech, DT | N=4: Pastoral support (Staff 1), OT assistant (Staff 6), key stage 2 teacher (Staff 7), tutor (Staff 8) |
| David | SENCo, Spanish teacher, Tutor, HT, One to one, Outdoor area, Art teacher, Food tech teacher, IT teacher, Asst Head, Spanish room | Maths, Music, Spanish | N=3: Spanish teacher (Staff 9), pastoral support (Staff 1), tutor (Staff 10) |

Table 3: Steps undertaken when collecting data

| Data collection steps | Actions associated with each step |
| --- | --- |
| 1. Classroom Observations of Pupils | Observations of pupils in at least 5 different lessons<br>Lessons could be chosen by the pupils<br>Pupils were able to say if they did not want a particular lesson observed |
| 2. Setting the scene | Met with each participant over the course of 1 lesson<br>Pupils were reminded of the purpose of the project and right to withdraw<br>Pupils given the opportunity to ask questions<br>Pupils given schedule for the week – and allocated a lesson slot for taking photos and date for photo-elicitation interview<br>Researcher and pupil talked through photo activity using researcher script<br>Pupils were provided with an opportunity to jot down initial ideas for photos<br>A member of staff was nearby should the pupils have had any questions |
| 3. Taking photos | Pupils were given time within 1 lesson in which to take photos<br>Pupils were accompanied by the researcher and one member of staff around the school<br>Photos were taken with a digital camera that was _only_ used for the project<br>Pupils took approx. 15-20 photos each |

Researcher reminded pupils of the aim of the activity using a visual prompt

Researcher brought diary to take notes on the order and nature of photos taken, for example, areas of the school where the pupil had spent more time taking photos and any reflections that the pupils shared at this stage

School staff who the pupils wanted to take photos of were asked for their verbal permission beforehand. After the session with the pupil finished, the researcher provided the adult with a consent form to obtain written consent for including photos in any published materials.

Pupils viewed photos on camera screen after each shot, with option to re-take any they were unhappy with

At the end of the session, photos were transferred to a secure password protected USB and deleted from the internal camera storage

4. Photo-elicitation interview

Pupils were provided with 1 lesson in which to discuss the photos

This session consisted of two parts: general discussion and photo sorting task

The researcher used scripts to explain and manage the discussion and photo sharing task (available from corresponding author)

Discussion recorded on a dictaphone and transferred to a password protected USB for secure storage

Pupils were reminded that participation was voluntary, and that they had the right to withdraw at any time

Researcher brought two printed copies of the photos – one was given to the pupil to keep at the end of the interview

A member of staff was seated nearby should the pupil have had any questions

Table 4: Practices for supporting participation and learning points for schools and Educational Psychologists (EPs)

| Main participation theme (from Black-Hawkins, 2010) | Key practices for supporting participation | Key words | Learning points for reflection |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Accessing the classroom** | Allowing breaks / timeouts in and out of the classroom for all pupils | Compromise<br>Boundaries | A culture that promotes flexibility in school systems may enable autistic pupils to make decisions about how and when they learn. Practitioners should consider where the curriculum is more flexible, and where opportunities could be created for pupils to directly influence the activities they do in school. Where possible, these practices should be considered within a whole-school approach rather than as a targeted intervention. Getting to know learners in order to identify their interests, skills, and capabilities is vital to supporting engagement. |
| | Tapping into pupil interests | Hooks<br>Roots<br>Keys | |
| **Accessing the curriculum** | Timetabling and extra-curricular activities | Flexibility<br>Negotiation<br>Pupil-led | A partnership approach to decision-making may be helpful for creating actions that are agreeable to both staff and pupils. The findings provide several examples where staff at the case school approached students using strategies such as negotiation, which were reported to result in positive outcomes. Schools could learn from the examples provided and consider how these might be adapted for a different context. Staff should also consider how to develop relationships with pupils to make partnership working more effective. |
| | School council | Democratic<br>Consistent<br>Attendance<br>Listening | |
| **Achievement** | Recognising strengths, interests, | Choosing<br>Directing<br>Independence | Decision-making is a skill that may need to be learnt. The findings suggested that some pupils may appear unsure or even worried when asked to make decisions. Therefore practitioners should be |

| | and expertise of learners<br>Focusing on what learners can do | Negotiation | mindful of this when asking pupils to take part in decision-making and may need to provide pupils with additional information, guidance and practice, both about some of the available choices and potential processes involved with and/or outcomes of these choices. |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Diversity** | Establishing mutual relationships of acceptance and recognition | Sorting<br>Listening<br>Advice<br>Friendship<br>Attention<br>Explanation<br>Leadership<br>Humanity | Pupils valued the relationships with staff at the case school and identified the actions of staff that were important. Practitioners should consider asking pupils at their school about what teachers can do to help them feel heard.<br>Carers may not be aware of how their children participate in decision-making at the school. Schools should consider how to make their day-to-day practices more explicit to parents and carers, and share more information on how their children participate in decision-making at the school.<br>Pupils valued seeing staff as human beings who have their own interests and personalities in order to develop rapport (e.g. seeing staff in a fun role such as the play as well as the class teacher, particularly important with staff who are usually the 'disciplinarian' or teachers of non-preferred subjects). |