Listening, Learning, Leadership... and the *I'm Me* Programme

Paula Flynn, Michael Shevlin and Anne Lodge discuss pupil voice research conducted with students identified with Emotional and/or Behavioural Difficulties in mainstream Post-Primary education.

Young people want to be heard. Internationally however, the voices of some students are seldom sought, in particular, those of children with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD). Reidun Tangen points out 'it is somewhat paradoxical that those pupils, who literally, often speak or shout loudest in the classroom, are those whose voices are most seldom heard' (Tangen, 2009:841). Nonetheless, there is agreement in much of the literature that 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. For that reason, the objective of the project described here was based on a 'bottom up' approach, to ascertain directly from student participants who had been assessed with EBD, their views on what may facilitate their engagement and help to prevent disaffection and social exclusion.

Children with EBD in Ireland are designated as having special educational needs as defined by the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004, where they are assessed as in need of resource support. The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) uses the term EBD 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 internalizing and/or externalizing behaviours' (Department of Education and Skills, 2010 p. 4). It is difficult to establish national prevalence rates of EBD. However, the National Council for Special Education Implementation Report in 2006 suggests that an estimation of 8% of children presenting with Mental Health issues was conservative as it did not include children with milder difficulties which may result in special educational needs. In a recent study (Banks, McCoy and Shevlin, forthcoming), the prevalence of children who are identified as having EBD is disproportionately from lower income households with the number of boys exceeding that of girls.

The incentive behind this pupil voice research project is influenced by the knowledge that students with EBD are at
greater risk than their peers of experiencing disaffection and failure in school and potentially, social exclusion. Within this complex umbrella term there is a broad spectrum of difficulties ranging from internalising behaviours – which the young person may present by being withdrawn, isolated, anxious or depressed – through to externalising behaviours, which may present as hyperactivity, aggression or volatility; oppositional, disruptive or disturbing behaviour.

The practical interventions which emerged from this study and are presented here correspond to the process of positive strategies and relationship development which is recommended by the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) in their guidelines on ‘promoting good behaviour’ and a ‘response to inappropriate behaviour’ (NEWB, 2008, p 420-46). The National Behavioural Support Service (NBSS) similarly advocates positive strategies that ‘sustain a school-wide system of positive behaviour support’ (NBSS, 2009, p 2), in order to nurture and pursue positive behaviour for learning. This research complements and enhances the position and evidence outlined by both the NEWB and the NBSS and the policies they promote within the practice of methods to encourage and sustain positive relationships, engagement and learning.

Between 2008 and 2011, research for this project was conducted in four mainstream schools with young people who had been identified with varying difficulties positioned in the spectrum of EBD. The main goal of the research was to determine the impact on these students when their voices were listened to and they were encouraged to become ‘active agents’ in changing their experience of school. In one interview, a boy who was asked to describe what it was like to have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder remarked with great insight that apart from having good days and bad days, “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 (Flynn et al. 2011).

The *I’m Me Programme* involved regular interviews with the student participants. Where teenagers had indicated particular disaffection, or had been identified as being regularly aggressive or challenging in class, interviews were conducted on a weekly basis. Focus groups, which included students within the same year group [usually 2nd Year or 5th Year groups], were also conducted. With some of the young people, it took up to three months before the interviews yielded genuine interest or participation but with the majority of students, their curiosity about the process encouraged their involvement and contributions much more quickly. Out of a cohort of thirty five, one student who was identified with complex emotional difficulties, rarely engaged in conversation during individual interviews but insisted on being included in group activities and contributed, if briefly during focus group sessions. Some of the group activities organised for the participants included creative workshops; e.g. drama (usually focussing on conflict resolution), sculpture, music and art.

The reasoning behind these creative sessions was to encourage contributions from participants who were less articulate than their peers and to provide opportunities for group activities to foster positive relationships and attachment within the peer group and correspondingly within the school.

Questions put to the students during individual and group interviews were designed to encourage ideas from them that might facilitate their sense of responsibility for behaviour and engagement in school. A number of interventions were generated from this process which, with prior agreement from Principals and other school leaders, including Special Needs Co-ordinators, Guidance Counsellors and Year Heads, were piloted where appropriate.

The most popular and successful strategies that emerged from the programme, are ‘My PAD’, ‘peer-mentoring’, ‘student led workshops’ and ‘chill out/buddy cards’. All of the participant schools chose to continue employing at least one or more of these interventions as sustainable methods of addressing emotional and/or behavioural challenges, the most popular of which is *My PAD*. *My PAD* is a ‘positive aims diary’ which was designed with input from the young participants in this research project in response to their aspiration to be ‘noticed’ and ‘acknowledged’ in their positive efforts and good behaviour. For some of the children who collaborated on this venture, most communication from the school to their home prior to this had been as a result of challenging behaviour or non-conformance with disciplinary procedures in the school.

The language of the diary was negotiated with the students and written from the perspective of the young person to the teacher(s), e.g.; *My aims are worded positively so as to remind me of what I should be doing; Try to observe me achieving my aims. At the end of the class if I have achieved my goals, please initial the appropriate boxes and feel free to add a positive comment.*
Three positive aims for one week are agreed upon between a coordinator and pupil. It is recommended that one should be easy for the young person to achieve, one more challenging and one particularly challenging. Before every class, the student gives the diary to the subject teacher pointing out his/her goals for that week. Before the end of the class, the teacher acknowledges by ticking a box when the student has realised their goals. Boxes are left empty if the student has not been successful but if the aims have been chosen correctly, at least one aim should be successfully reached with little effort. The justification for this is to ensure that the student will realise success and acknowledgment while at the same time striving to address the target challenging behaviour/attitude or issue which has been identified as problematic.

The data and response from the participating pupils, their teachers and parents has been very positive. The young people have pointed out that having a ‘record of good behaviour’ encouraged them to make more effort to meet their set goals and they were pleasantly surprised by the positive impact it had on their relationships with teachers as well as the response from parents/guardians, who are encouraged to sign the diary on a weekly basis and include an encouraging acknowledgement of effort.

Teachers and Year-Heads in participating schools have also been very pleased with the impact of **My PAD** and three of the participating schools involved to date have rolled out the intervention to include **any** child who might need some support or encouragement around behaviour or self-esteem.

A record of goals or behaviour in schools is not a new idea; however, what is different about **My PAD** is first and foremost the emphasis on acknowledging ‘positive behaviour’ but most importantly, the contractual language which is presented from the perspective of the student. The format of the booklet is colourful and glossy which also appealed to the participants. Initially a black and white photocopied version of the booklet was used but many copies ‘went missing’ or were misplaced, whereas teachers have commented on the fact that pupils are quite proud and protective of the newer, more attractive and sturdy version.

Follow up feedback from the participating schools in 2012 has reinforced the need for an understanding behind the ‘use’ of **My PAD**. One coordinator commented recently that although she still found that students were benefiting greatly from using the diary, especially students from the Junior Cycle, she was disappointed that it had not helped with one young first year who was presenting with very challenging behaviour in school. She pointed out that the young girl had been ‘put’ on My PAD on at least three occasions to date but had defiantly refused to cooperate or use it. After some discussion around the origins of the intervention the coordinator agreed that it had been presented to the young student as though it were another version of a ‘behaviour report card’ with little or no conversation around why it might be helpful or any agreement on objectives/aims or sense of ownership within the process from the student. The success of **My PAD** is firmly rooted in the process from which it was designed as part of a consultation opportunity and negotiation between designated coordinator and student must be presented as an opportunity for success and acknowledgment.

Overuse of the diary, either by giving it to too many students in the same class group or the same student for too many weeks in succession, is not advised. More than three students presenting the diary to a teacher at the beginning of class is disruptive and the impact of the process has proved to be more effective when a student uses the diary for a maximum of three consecutive weeks. This is not prescriptive, however, and some students have benefited from using the diary on a number of occasions throughout the year although, preferably not for more than three weeks at any one time. The peer-mentoring programme differed from similar strategies already in place in many schools as it involved mentors in the Senior Cyde who had previously presented with challenging behaviours in school and/or who had been identified as having an EBD. Within this research project the older students involved at the time were taken from either 5th Year Leaving Certificate Applied or the traditional 5th year cohort. The younger mentees during the research process were 1st and 2nd year students with similar assessments. The justification behind the process was to foster a sense of responsibility on the part of the older students, as well as collegiality and respect from the younger students.

Feedback from the participants was mostly positive from the senior students and unanimously positive from the junior students, who particularly enjoyed the experience, many of whom pointed out in a focus group meeting that they would like to be mentors if given the opportunity once they reached 5th year. The participating schools timetabled one class period per week for the 1st, 2nd and 5th year participants to meet for group activities, workshops and meetings. Time was given during some of these
sessions for the participants to chat and share ideas around what helped them succeed and what they identified as obstacles to successful participation and engagement in school. A number of the suggestions which emerged from these conversations were offered as scenarios which were acted out and analysed by the participants during ‘conflict resolution’ in the drama workshops. Another idea which emerged from the mentoring programme was modelled as peer-led team-building workshop afternoons, which the participants organised with their class tutors to cultivate positive relationships and boost morale amongst their class groups. The initiative was particularly effective in classes where the students who took leadership roles in these workshops had previously been the perpetrators of behaviours that had impacted on class morale.

Another intervention which emerged from interview sessions and was refined during the mentoring group meetings was that of the ‘Chill Out/buddy cards’. Different schools used variations on the same idea. Students were given a card which allocated a designated allocation of time that could be used in different ‘chunks’ over a term or schoolyear. If a student believed that s/he was about to lose their temper or felt particularly anxious, disruptive, hyperactive or upset, they could ‘spend’ a specified chunk of their allocated minutes on the card with the agreement of their teacher and depending on the variation employed in the participating school, the student had to find either a coordinator within the I’m Me programme (which could be a Year Head, Guidance Counsellor, Resource Teacher etc.) or else they had permission to contact their senior mentor in the case of junior students.

At first the strategy was met with some resistance in schools and it was suggested that the students would abuse the privilege and use all of their allocated time in a week or perhaps even a day. On the contrary, evidence from the data collected has proved that none of the students used up all of their allocated minutes over either the term or year as relevant.

The interventions, which emerged from this pupil-voice research, realised success during the process specifically because they were negotiated and suggested by the students themselves. A significant theme which emerged through the analysis of this research is the importance of ‘leadership’ in the school. 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 cooperation 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.

In conclusion, from feedback which included the participating students, their teachers and parents/guardians, thirty-one out of thirty-five students with EBD experienced significantly more positive engagement in school as a result of their participation in the I’m Me Programme. Analysis of the data reinforces the significance of:

- Positive relationships and positive experiences in school;
- Attachment, a sense of belonging to a group/friendship/identification with the school;
- ‘Voice’ and the empowerment of being ‘listened to’;
- ‘Leadership’ – effective leadership within schools in response to ‘bottom up’ approaches and also the impact of leadership opportunities for the pupils themselves.

Further details of this research, The I’m Me Programme and the interventions discussed can be obtained from Paula Flynn flynnpm@tcd.ie

Paula Flynn is completing her doctoral thesis with the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin in the area of Social Inclusion, with specific focus on pupils in mainstream schools who present with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties. Formally a post primary teacher, she now teaches on and contributes to post graduate programmes in Education.

Dr Michael Shevlin teaches in the area of special education on postgraduate programmes in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. He has written extensively on inclusion issues in education.

Dr. Anne Lodge is Principal of the Church of Ireland College of Education. She researches and writes about equality issues in education with a particular focus on inclusion of those with special needs, recognition of belief diversity, gender and sexual orientation in Irish society and education.

REFERENCE LIST:
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