Introduction

The inclusion agenda in England and elsewhere in the world has been guided by international human rights agreements, educational legislation and policies that have promoted the ideology of securing a better future for children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). In 1994, the UNESCO Salamanca Statement was agreed by 92 governments and 25 international organisations and called for the inclusion of all children and young people with SEND to be the norm. The guiding principle was that 'ordinary' schools should accommodate all children and young people, regardless of physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. Further endorsing the principle of inclusive education is the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). This human rights treaty ratified not only the right of children and young people with SEND to receive education without discrimination (Article 24) but, most importantly, their right to express their views on all matters affecting them (Article 12); to maximum participation regardless of their disability (Article 23); and an entitlement to discipline in schools that is administered with due respect for their human rights (Article 28).

In 1997, in England, a country with a long tradition in special education, the new Labour government published the Green Paper *Excellence for All Children: Meeting Special Educational Needs*, thereby giving support to the Salamanca Statement. Subsequent initiatives and legislation to safeguard the rights of children and young people with SEND followed, which included the 2001 Special Educational Needs and Disability Act and the 2001 SEN Code of Practice. The 2001 Act stated for the first time that discrimination, exclusion, rejection or intentional refusal of a child or young person with SEND admission to a school was an infringement of their rights and, hence, deemed

1

unlawful. Additionally, the 2001 SEN Code of Practice recognised the right of children and young people with SEND to be involved in decision making and to express an opinion on any matter affecting their lives. The Children and Families Act (2014) and the revised Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice: 0-25 years (2014), further emphasised participation from children and young people with SEND. All the above-mentioned enactments were ratified with the intent to transforming pupils with SEND from being passive recipients into active participants.

What do children and young people with SEND report about their school experiences?

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in educational research in eliciting the voices of children and young people with SEND on their mainstream and special school experiences. Overall, the findings indicate that they *are* capable of expressing their views and feelings (O'Connor, Hodkinson, Burton, & Torstensson, 2011; Cefai & Cooper, 2010), can make pertinent suggestions for school improvement (Loyd, 2013), provide constructive feedback for teaching and learning (Blackman, 2011; Kubiak, 2017) and, most importantly, can contribute positively to promoting school reform and inclusive practice (Adderley et al., 2015). Cafai and Cooper (2010), for example, in a review of eight small-scale qualitative studies, reported the reasons given by secondary-aged pupils with SEMH (previously social, emotional and behavioural) difficulties for their struggle to fit into mainstream schools. All studies involved an average number of 14 participants attending special or mainstream secondary settings in Malta. Findings indicated that pupils' experiences were summarised under five main themes: poor relationships with teachers; victimisation; a sense of oppression and powerlessness; unconnected learning experiences; exclusion and stigmatisation.

Similarly, Sellman (2009) sought to explore the perspectives of secondary-aged pupils on their school's behaviour policy by forming a student research group. The research group consisted of six young adolescents (aged 13-16) attending a special school for SEMH in the English Midlands. Following seven meetings, pupils voiced the need for clarity and consistency in implementation of a behaviour management policy, positive relationships with teachers and good communication. In another UK study, Sheffield and Morgan (2017) employed a constructionist grounded theory methodology to elicit the mainstream school experiences of nine young adolescents aged 13-16 with an SEMH identification. Qualitative data were analysed thematically. The themes of 'struggles' and 'strengths' were identified, with teacher-pupil relationships and receiving additional support contributing to both themes. Acknowledgement of the academic and interpersonal strengths of the young people by teachers and peers was positively viewed, as was the possibility of 'becoming a different person'. Examination opportunities were perceived by the young people as being positive motivators for success. None of the young people interviewed were aware they had a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care (EHC) plan or were cognisant of the SEMH label being applied to them; all evaluated this label negatively. Somewhat in contrast, Norwich and Kelly (2004), who sought the views on inclusion of 101 pupils with MLD (age 10-11 and 13-14), found that the majority of young people held positive views about school and reported that the main facilitators of their inclusion was the quality of support they received at school and having intimate relations with their peers.

Student Voice

In the history of education, the concept of Student Voice has been linked to different meanings, given different emphasis by different scholars in different contexts. In 1986, Giroux and McLaren (1986) used Student Voice to refer to the practices school should

employ to promote the values of democratic citizenship and social justice. They argued that Student Voice 'refers to the various measures by which students and teachers actively participate in dialogue. It is related to the discursive means whereby teachers and students attempt to make themselves "heard" and to define themselves as active authors of their world (Giroux & McLaren, 1986 p. 235). In recent years, the idea of Student Voice has mainly been used to refer to rights and empowerment of the voices of students at school (Fleming, 2013; Messiou, 2006; Mitra, 2004) as well as to school reforms that encourage students' participation and involvement in decision making on various school issues (Quinn & Owen, 2016).

In Australia, Quinn and Owen (2016) explored pupil and staff perspectives on a primary school's approach to Student Voice and student leadership. Student Voice, in this study, referred to the informed decisions pupils made about their own learning and about school issues at an individual level as well as to the decisions they made collectively in collaboration with adults. After analysing thematically school documents along with holding staff and pupil interviews, the findings revealed that daily positive teacher-to-student interactions and regular collaboration between pupils and teachers had positive outcomes in enhancing the power of Student Voice in the school community. At a personal level, pupils' involvement in Student Voice was found to bring benefits, including the development of collaboration, communication skills and active listening as well as enhancing their sense of school belonging, so too, their belief that they were capable of positively contributing to school improvement. A well-structured student voice mechanism and the provision of a clear agenda was found particularly to facilitate pupils' participation. A reported downside was that the competitive process of elections resulted in less popular pupils being unwilling to participate and to put themselves forward as representatives.

Similarly, in the USA context, Mitra (2004) employed a ground theory, in a study carried out over two years, to investigate secondary-aged pupils' participation in Student Voice; referring to the reform efforts happening at school in which students and staff were working together on common goals. Observations, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews were used for the data collection. The findings revealed that pupils' involvement enabled them to articulate positive experiences about school and facilitated their feelings of belonging, competence and their belief that they could exert influence. However, the degree to which these benefits were accomplished was related to the effectiveness of Student Voice efforts and the nature of teacher-to-pupil relations. Similar obstacles to pupil empowerment and participation were noted by Messiou (2006) in a study involving 227 primary aged pupils in Cyprus. The findings revealed that limited resources, and teachers' restricted time for collaborating and listening to pupils' views were two of the reasons reported for the school avoiding seeking their views about school issues. As stated by Messiou (2006), having the mechanisms to gather information from pupils is one step towards empowerment, but implementation is the actual evidence that indicates that schools truly intend to engage with pupils and address their needs. In the UK, Fleming (2013), after critically reviewing three research and evaluation projects that involved pupils as researchers, and directly elicited their views on their participation in school decision making, concluded that they had the skills, capacity and knowledge to express their views and make constructive suggestions about school change but rarely was it the case that their suggestions were actually implemented.

Despite legislation and initiatives aimed at promoting the right of *all* children and young people to express their views on all matters affecting their lives, the research literature indicates that their voices, particularly those with SEND, frequently go unheard. The study reported here, part of a larger study exploring the well-being and feelings of

5

belonging of secondary-aged pupils (Author, 2017), was aimed at contributing to the field by reporting the views on their school experiences of young people with SEND.

The study

Aims of the study

The study had the purpose of exploring the schooling experiences of secondary-aged pupils with moderate learning difficulties (MLD) and social, emotional and mental health difficulties (SEMH) as a way of understanding their needs and facilitating their inclusion. The focus was on empowering young people with SEND to speak up about their mainstream education. The specific aims of the study were:

1. to investigate the mainstream experiences of pupils with MLD and SEMH;

2. to explore the reasons given for positively or negatively affecting their sense of school belonging.

3. to investigate their social relations with their teachers, teaching assistants (TAs) and peers.

The rationale for focussing on the categories of MLD and SEMH was as follows.

1. *Moderate learning difficulties:* This is the most common type of SEND overall. According to government statistics, 21.6% of children and young people with SEND have this primary type of need (DfE, 2018).

2. *Social, emotional and mental health difficulties:* Within the group of the children and young people with SEND exclusion rates (permanent and fixed) are highest for pupils identified as having SEMH difficulties (52.5%) (DfE, 2018), which suggests possible negative school experiences for these pupils.

6

The context

The research was conducted in a suburban metropolitan area in England. Three mainstream state-funded secondary schools took part, with all being judged 'Good' by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted)[1]. All schools had a Student Voice program in place.

Sampling procedure

All students from Years 7 to 10 in each school (approximately 500 students per school) were invited to take part in the main study, which required completion of a 56-item questionnaire consisting of three subscales: sense of school belonging (SOSB), perceived inclusive ethos (IE), and social relations (SR). Prior to data collection, a pilot study was conducted to test the clarity of items and their internal consistency. Cronbach's alphas were satisfactory for all scales with an average at .78. A total of 1,440 pupils (97%) completed the questionnaire. Following completion pupils were asked to indicate whether they wished to participate in semi-structured interviews and 48% of all respondents indicated they were willing to take part. The participants were also asked to complete the pupil self-report version of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997). The SDQ is a brief measure to screen for behavioural and emotional difficulties in young people aged around 11-16 years. According to SDQ terminology, young people with high scores in SDQ total difficulties are classified as 'abnormal', followed by 'borderline' to 'normal'. The SDQ, in addition to the professional advice sought from the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO), was used to triangulate pupils' identification. In particular, after the completion of the SDQ, the SENCO of each

---

[1] There is a 4-point grating scale for Ofsted inspection judgements: i) outstanding, ii) good, iii) requires improvement, and iv) inadequate. A school judged as good at their most recent inspection, they will have a short inspection approximately every 3 years (Ofsted, 2014).

school was asked to identify pupils with MLD and SEMH based on school's SEND register. Of the pupils identified with MLD and SEMH, those who had indicated they would be willing to participate in semi-structured interviews, were invited.

A purposive sample of 37 pupils was selected to participate, based on SEND status (MLD or SEMH), and/or classification on the SDQ and scores on the SOSB subscale. This yielded a total of 17 MLD, 13 SEMH and 7 'abnormal' pupils. Of these, 8 MLD, 4 SEMH and 3 'abnormal' pupils scored in the upper quartile of the SOSB subscale ($>=36\%$), indicating a high sense of school belonging and 9 MLD, 9 SEMH and 4 'abnormal' pupils scored in the lower quartile ($>=29\%$), which suggested a low sense of school belonging. Of the 13 pupils identified as SEMH, according to school SEND registers, five were classified as 'normal' by the SDQ terminology and eight were classified as 'abnormal'. Eight typical pupils also participated in the interviews; their views are reported here as a comparable group. Of these eight typical pupils, four scored in the upper quartile of the SOSB subscale ($>=36\%$) and four in the lower quartile ($>=29\%$).

Data collection method

An interview schedule was designed comprising 36 open-ended questions, with supplementary questions to explore responses further. These quizzed the pupils' sense of school belonging and attitude towards school (e.g. *'How do you feel about being in this school?'*); their perceived school ethos: behaviour management (e.g. *'What is your view on the way teachers apply behaviour management strategies at school?'*); inclusion (e.g. *'What is your view about Student Voice?'*); as well as their social relations with teachers, TAs and peers (e.g. *'With whom do you feel close at school?'*).

Three pupils (i.e. classified as SEMH, MLD, typical) who had already completed the main questionnaire were invited to take part in a pilot study to test interview procedure

and refine the interview schedule. The pilot study followed the five stages recommended by Breakwell, Hammond, Fife-Schaw and Smith (2006) to enhance the reliability of the interviews, namely: a) assess whether the explanation of the interview is understood by all participants, b) check the degree to which specific questions can be easily perceived by them, c) make the necessary amendments that arise from the pilot feedback, d) test whether the participants engage easily with the interview process, and e) evaluate whether the responding answers are the desired ones. Piloting indicated the need for some rewording of questions to ensure they were understood by all pupils, e.g. '... *behaviour that will result in a sanction'* was replaced with *'...behaviour that will get me in trouble.'*

Procedure

All thirty-four interviews were conducted face-to-face by the first author. Pupils were offered the option to be interviewed individually or in groups of two or three. Justification for variation in conducting interviews has been provided by Kitzinger (1995, p.299 in Robson, 2011), who stated that group interviews 'do not discriminate against people who cannot read or write and they can encourage participation from people reluctant to be interviewed on their own or who feel they have nothing to say.' It was noted that pupils identified as MLD, in particular, showed a preference for group interviews.

Prior to the interview process, the participants were provided with an explanation of the aims of the study. The importance of their contribution was also emphasised. Their permission for the interviews to be audio taped was sought; one pupil (SEMH) did not give permission and withdrew. The interviews lasted between 15 and 25 minutes. An 'ice-breaker' activity preceded the interviews in an attempt to create a relaxed and friendly atmosphere.

Ethical issues

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the research ethics committee of a Higher Education (HE) institution in England. Written consent was sought from all pupil participants and their parents. Pupils were informed of their rights to confidentiality, anonymity and withdrawal from the study in line with the guidelines of the British Psychological Society (BPS) *Code of Human Research Ethics* (2014). The data were stored and processed in compliance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically coded via the employment of the qualitative data analysis program QSR NVivo 10. Thematic analysis was performed through the process of coding in six phases, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), followed by an inductive and deductive circle of coding, as explained by Saldaña (2013). The rationale for selecting thematic analysis was to produce a surface-level analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), where emphasis would be given to the voices of pupils with SEND, rather than on the first author's personal interpretation of their perceptions. In addition, the use of thematic analysis enabled the first author to use theory as a sense of direction to explore themes across the dataset.

During the inductive coding, the first author familiarised herself with the data by listening to the voices of pupils and any theme that occurred or assumption made was thus data-driven. The deductive analysis was structured around how the questionnaire and interview data addressed school ethos, sense of school belonging and social relations, as defined by the extant literature in the field. This means that prior to the preliminary analysis of data, the first author had already developed a framework of themes based on theory draw form literature which then use to organise, and group emerged themes from raw data accordingly.

The first grouping, school ethos, encompassed two sub-themes: behaviour management strategies and inclusivity. The second grouping, sense of school belonging, also comprised two sub-themes: reasons for liking and reasons for not liking school. Finally, the third grouping, social relations, comprised three sub-themes: pupil-to-teacher relation, pupil-to-TA relation, and pupil-to-pupil relation. Following identification of the seven sub-themes of responses, the data were examined to identify themes within the categories. Finally, patterns were looked for among the themes.

Findings

The results presented here emerged from responses to open-ended questions enquiring into the schooling experiences of pupils with SEND. The views of typical pupils are also displayed as a comparable group. In this section, only a sample of the elicited views are presented as being illustrative of all pupil-participant responses. These responses are reported under the themes and sub-themes that emerged.

Pupils' perceptions of their school ethos

*Behaviour management***:** The pupils who had the least positive perspectives on the behaviour management strategies employed by their school were those with SEMH. The majority of them expressed the view that teachers usually paid attention to challenging behaviour, while they tended to ignore good behaviour and hard work.

> *'I'm not a bad pupil, but I do speak in class–it annoys me because I've seen people working hard, but all the teachers' attention goes towards the bad pupils […]. It frustrates me because the good pupils aren't doing anything, but all their attention is not focused on the goodness of what they're doing, but on what the bad pupils are doing.'*

11

All pupils with SEMH reported their dissatisfaction with the behaviour management strategies and commented that those used neither taught them what appropriate behaviour is, nor helped them improve their behaviour. However, as one pupil explained, challenging behaviour was a way to escape lessons, as this meant being sent out of class.

'I think that the teachers do need to be a bit more strict, because pupils can get quite rude to them and they kind of just let it go, so it doesn't really teach them anything about what they're doing is wrong. But, it's normally just they get sent out and they come back in. It's not really learning nothing and I think pupil, try to be rude just to get out of class, so they don't have to do the work, but I think many teachers could be a bit more strict and actually punish them instead of just sending them out.'

The majority of pupils with SEMH also accused teachers of labelling and enacting discrimination against them. The statements of some pupils with SEMH revealed that the reasons for being unfairly treated were related to their 'bad' reputation and the label teachers attached to them.

'It is like teachers remember when you've been rude to them, so they're always going to carry the stigma of "That's the rude child, and he's going to do that again, so now I have to be even more harsh on him."'

'If you had a bad reputation in your old school, because they have the form, they'll pass it on to your next school and then you have that reputation [...] basically you become a label in their eyes. And because probably, I don't know, every teacher gets that, so if you do something, they'll think is you or if you do something, they'll take it in a more serious punishment.'

The issue of differential treatment towards pupils with challenging behaviour was also raised by interviewees identified with MLD. The majority of these pupils reported their empathy for their peers with challenging behaviour, and denounced teachers for excluding them from school.

'Sometimes they can be a bit unfair when they exclude them from the school, but I get sending them to a different class or sending them out of the classroom, I feel that's a good thing.'

What is more, a majority of pupils with MLD also expressed their dissatisfaction with the behaviour management and the ineffective way teachers managing misbehaviour. They not only got distracted by pupils with challenging behaviour in class, which negatively affected their learning, but they also received limited support, as the attention of teachers was mainly being given to control those disturbing the lessons.

'The teachers are always tending to the bad people, so you don't get really to learn as much because ..., it sort of shortens the time for the people that want to learn and get on with their work.'

Nevertheless, only a minority of typical pupils considered teachers were inconsistent in their administration of sanctions imposed on pupils with challenging behaviour, whilst the majority of them complained about the special treatment this group of pupils received.

'Because you could be in class and get detention for talking, and the next day one person is talking, and they don't get detention for it.'

'They usually pay more attention to the people who are usually bad, and if they do one thing good, they will give them a merit, but people who are usually always good don't get the merits.'

Typical pupils were also the only group who praised the behaviour management strategies. A widespread view expressed by them was that their counterparts with challenging behaviour deserved to be punished, as they were not following the rules and were disturbing others, thus preventing them from learning.

'They actually manage it really good, because they do these levels [traffic lights behaviour management system]. So, then you know you are actually doing

something wrong and so you change your behaviour. When they're bad, they send them outside. Yeah, that's what they do, and you carry on learning.'

Inclusivity: When pupils with SEMH were asked to comment on the support they received, only a minority of them expressed their satisfaction with that they received from teachers, while sometimes contradictory views were expressed about the support received from TAs.

> *'[At school] They give us as much attention as possible. So, sometimes they bring TAs and assistants to help us, especially when we're in the lower set, then specially we have that good attention, because there's less of us in a group so we get more attention than if we had 40 people in the classroom.'*

> *'They can sometimes be a bit annoying, because when you don't need help, they come over...They don't know what you're doing or what the teacher is teaching, so it's kind of like you're teaching them.'*

Perceptions of pupils with MLD revealed that the allocation of support provided by teachers was considered not to be equally distributed in class. A minority of pupils expressed the opinion that teachers mainly supported high-achievers.

'I think they put more effort in the pupils that are already smart.'

Others, however, held the view that most of teacher attention was paid to pupils with challenging behaviour and those who struggled with their learning.

A majority of typical pupils also voiced the opinion that teachers allocated their attention unfairly among different groups within class, with attention being given primarily to high-achievers and/or pupils with SEND, while the group of quiet typical pupils with average attainment, was perceived as being overlooked.

> *'If you're really bad in the lesson, then the teacher will give you more attention. If you're one of the people that are really good, and you talk a lot, and you're also really good at work, then you also get attention. But if you're in the middle,*

like you don't put your hand up that much, and maybe you're not the best at the subject, you don't really get that much attention.'

Group work: This emerged as another sub-theme of inclusivity. Responses from the majority of pupils with SEMH revealed two obstacles that they considered hindered their successful participation in group work. The first pertained to their difficulty in socialising with other peers and the second, related to their finding it hard to control their behaviour.

'It can be a bit of a disaster, because I have trouble understanding, I have trouble socially sometimes. I think sometimes we, as pupils, can abuse that […] we're just going to go with our friends and we're not going to do any work.'

Conversely, for the majority of pupils with MLD, group work was seen as an opportunity to socialise and interact with other peers.

'They're doing it like every day now. They encourage other people to work together so we get to know each other much more.'

A majority of typical pupils also praised the positive effects of group work, by emphasising the way in which it benefitted their learning.

'I prefer it because you get to –you're not just sitting on your own. You get to hear other people's opinions on whatever you're doing. It kind of gives you more ideas, in a way – say if you're doing an essay, it gives you more ideas of your own and gives them ideas. It kind of like helps each other out.'

However, according to some typical pupils, if group work was to be successful two requirements were essential: the necessity for all pupils to behave properly and being allocated to a 'good' group, i.e. one consisting of pupils with high attainment.

Student Voice: This is another sub-theme of inclusivity. The findings from the study shed light on the reasons why pupils with SEND and typical pupils choose to abstain from participating in Student Voice. Responses from the majority of pupils with

15

SEMH revealed that they considered their involvement in decision making was very limited and that most decisions were made by those in authority, i.e. teachers. Pupils with SEMH also felt excluded from the opportunity of being voted for as pupil representative. The main reasons that appeared to be holding them back them back, were their lack of confidence and their perceptions of the unfair process of election, in so far as they believed that the most 'popular' pupils would be those who other peers would vote for.

> *'Say it was three people, and one had a few mates and the other one was really popular and the other one had no friends, the really popular one, I think, would get it, because they've got more friends.'*

Conversely, a majority of pupils with MLD seemed to lack awareness of what Student Voice was, whilst regarding those few who were aware, they were unwilling to take part due to lack of interest or most importantly, lack of confidence. Disappointment regarding the few changes that took place was another reason that led to their decision to abstain from being pupil representatives.

> *'I don't find it's important to me. It sort of doesn't interest me at all […] I come to school to learn, I don't really care about what else is going on, just to learn.'*

> *'I have to speak in front of the whole school and I just don't like that.'*

> *'Nothing really happens.'*

A majority of typical pupils also expressed their disappointment with Student Voice. For them, the main reasons identified for being unwilling to take part were the lack of implementation of suggested changes and fear of being intimidated for perceived 'obsequious' behaviour towards school staff.

> *'If you are a representative, you're a bit of looser…it's seen as a teacher's pet thing.'*

16

Pupils' perceptions of the reasons influencing their sense of school belonging

When pupils were asked to report the factors affecting their sense of school belonging, two sub-themes emerged: reasons for liking and reasons for not liking school. One of the most frequently cited reasons expressed by a majority of pupils with SEMH for not liking school were with regards to the ineffective structures applied in relation to start and end of the day, the duration of the lessons as well as their lack of commitment to do their work especially when they are were in a bad mood. These views are illustrated in the following statements:

> *'So, I don't mind school, but you know, sometimes, to wake up in the mornings to do homework, it can be a bit tiring, so I get stressed, but I don't hate school.'*

> *'If I have double lessons I don't really enjoy, then I don't really feel like coming to school because it's boring.'*

> *'it's just that I don't really want to do the work. Sometimes just tired, sometimes you're moody, you get really annoyed, and you just want to sit there and be quiet, then the teacher picks on you and all of that...'*

A majority of typical pupils also cited 'boring' lessons as one of the main reasons for not liking school. Specifically, they linked these with didactic teaching strategies, whilst 'fun' lessons were associated with interactive teaching approaches:

> *'A bad lesson is when we're doing boring work all the time and we don't have time to communicate or do fun activities, because I, in my opinion like doing group work or making presentations making the lesson fun.'*

Despite the different views expressed, common to all pupils, irrespective of their type of need, a reason given for liking school was interesting lessons, where interactive teaching strategies were used as well as their understanding of the importance of education in their life. Illustrations of these perspectives are given below:

> *'I like when I have a fun day. When I have enjoyable lessons that I don't get bored in.'*

'I think it is very important, because you're going to need the education, if you're going to get somewhere in life. But I'm not going to lie, I actually do find school a little bit difficult. I get distracted very, very easily and sometimes, well most times, I walk into the classroom late, because I don't want to be there.'

Pupils' perceptions of their social relations

***Relations with teachers*:** Whilst the majority of pupils with SEMH reported mainly negative relations with their teachers, some held positive views. When these pupils reported positive relations, they described teachers who were 'fun', who taught in a way that facilitated their learning and who had the skills to manage their challenging behaviour in a respectful way.

'He is a good teacher and he teaches you just right. You have fun and games sometimes, but sometimes he tells you when to stop. You know when to stop.'

Conversely, negative views were expressed about those teachers who lacked empathy and understanding and who mainly focused on academic attainment.

'I don't like coming to school because […] there's some of those teachers that you don't like, and if I'm in a bad mood, like angry or upset or something like that, I don't like coming to school, because then it's just going to be work, work, work, and no one is going to ask you, "Are you okay?" or anything, because they say that school is coming for learning. So, this frustration that you get, you have to leave it outside the classroom.'

A minority of pupils with SEMH also criticised the teaching methods applied by some teachers, who they felt ignored their individual needs, failed to provide them with second chances and did not give them enough time to complete the work or process information. Finally, negative views were expressed about those teachers who were unable to manage a class, or who were perceived as employing an authoritarian approach in order to gain control.

For the majority of pupils with MLD their relations with teachers appeared to be generally positive. Good teachers were described as those who supported them in the lessons, were approachable to talk to and who respected their privacy. They also praised those who they considered to be 'fun' and who employed interactive approaches to teaching and learning.

'They make it easy for you to learn by having some bits of fun, in it.'

However, a minority of pupils with MLD expressed dislike of teachers, who they considered behaved inconsistently and in a way that appeared to disregard their feelings. As one pupil with MLD expressed it:

'They start shouting for no reason.'

A majority of typical pupils also reported positive relations with their teachers. They expressed a preference for those who were friendly, willing to discuss things, taught through interactive lessons, and were able to control the class without being heavy handed.

'She was really nice, because she wasn't so relaxed with us that we could all go over her, but she wasn't really strict.'

A minority of typical pupils who expressed negative perspectives, reported dislike of those teachers who they considered were hostile, and unfriendly. For example:

'[There are these teachers that] you look down whenever you see them, because they're sort of scary. They just get so frustrated and start to argue all the time.'

Relations with TAs: With reference to their perceived relations with their TAs, pupils with SEMH were those who expressed the most contrasting views. Some expressed positive feelings about the support they received with their work, the support TAs gave in helping them to regain control of their behaviour, and about the psychological support

19

they provided. However, others expressed their resentment at not getting sufficient support and some complained about the quality of that which they received.

By way of some contrast, a majority of pupils with MLD reported generally positive relations with their TAs. They unanimously expressed their gratitude towards them for the educational support they provided, the encouragement to improve their behaviour, and their compassion when they had problems.

> *'When I am stuck at work, the assistant helps me…do the work and then so, I don't get detention.'*

***Relations with peers*:** A majority of pupils with SEMH reported overall negative perceptions about their relations with peers, with some reporting bullying and difficulties in forming relationships. Conversely, there was a minority of SEMH pupils, who expressed positive views about their relations with other peers at school.

> *'Whenever you say something, someone always has to disagree. There are quite a lot of insults and people think that they're better than you, so it makes you feel quite nervous and upset.'*

> *'So, yeah [it is easy for me to make friends], but it depends what cliques you have, because there's obviously cliques in school and it's easier, because I'm with the popular group, so we're all together in a big group. But I'd say, if you were a new person, then it would be harder for you to make friends.'*

Contrasting views about their peer relations were also expressed among pupils with MLD. A minority of them reported generally close friendships at school and developing new friendships was considered to be easy for some.

'You start speaking to them and they start speaking back, and you're friends.'

However, there was a minority of pupils with MLD, who reported being severely bullied due to their learning difficulties.

> *'People swear at me possibly because I'm different…when I come to class, and I start reading, people start passing me, because I can't do the reading, then I got bullied.'*

In contrast, a majority of typical pupils reported generally positive views about their relations with peers. All said they had trustworthy friends at school and claimed that making new friendships was easy.

Discussion

This study elicited the voices of secondary-aged pupils with SEND to understand their gained school experiences in mainstream English settings. Insights of pupils with SEMH and MLD revealed differences in their expressed school experiences, mainly depending on their type of need. As this study has indicated, pupils with SEMH were the ones who expressed the greatest dissatisfaction with school when compared to pupils with MLD and their typical counterparts. It can thus be speculated that the needs of pupils with SEMH are less satisfied within mainstream settings as compared to the needs of pupils with MLD (Author, 2018; Murray & Greenberg, 2001). Yet, despite their expressed differences, all pupils, irrespective of their type of need, voiced quite similar views on what makes a positive school experience for them. They all underlined the importance of receiving interesting and engaging lessons in making their school experience more worthwhile, thus increasing their desire to come to school. This finding is consistent with the research outcomes of a study conducted by Ireson and Hallam (2005), who found an association between pupils' perceived satisfaction with teaching and school liking.

What is more, all the pupils revealed that if their school experience was to improve, there was the need for the implementation of more effective behaviour

management strategies to teach appropriate behaviour, control misbehaviour and confine disruptiveness. This is consistent with Hatton's findings (2013) who stressed the implementation of effective behaviour management policies as a key element to engender inclusive schools, where everyone is included. All pupils, irrespective of their difficulties, expressed their desire to have teachers who allocated attention and support fairly among pupils in class. This was particularly so for those quiet typical pupils with average attainment, who felt that they were often overlooked. Finally, all pupils expressed the need to have positive social relations in their school life. Hence, that also included pupils with challenging behaviour, who felt particularly dissatisfied with their relations with teachers, TAs and peers. For example, pupils with SEMH along with their counterparts expressed respect for those teachers who were funny, knew how to control a class and taught in an interesting way.

To summarise, the findings of this study indicate that pupils with SEND have perceptive ideas about what makes a positive school experience for them and if schools and teachers acted upon more on their suggestions, enhancement of inclusive practice would be possible. However, one of the mains issues underlined in this study is that the voices of pupils with SEND often goes unheard, mainly due to ineffective mechanisms that are in place e.g. 'I have to speak in front of the whole school and I just don't like that'. This prevents pupils who lack confidence from expressing their views and when some others do, there is little action taken on their proposed ideas e.g. 'nothing really happens'. Similar findings had been elicited for other studies in the field (Fleming, 2013; Messiou, 2006; Quinn & Owen, 2016). It can thus be concluded that there is an urgent need for schools to redesign the applied mechanisms currently used to elicit pupils' voices. That means, replace exclusionary approaches, such as selection of student representatives based on popularity voting (i.e. voting based on popularity) with more

inclusive ones where all pupils, even those who lack confidence, would feel equally motivated and encouraged to express their views and take part in school's decision making. There is also the need to train teachers to listen to pupils' views and to put their reasonable suggestions into practice, if Student Voice is to encourage the involvement of all pupils in school decision making. Finally, there are two main limitations of this study. The first limitation is the small sample of participants, which limits generalisability of the study's findings. The second limitation is the validity of the sample as the identification of pupils relied on school recorded categories which renders a pupil's behaviour and attainment open to subjective interpretations.

Conclusion

In this paper, it has been shown that pupils with SEND are capable of articulating their views on what makes a positive school experience for them. Moreover, it has also emerged that independently of their different needs, all pupils expressed almost similar opinions on what they enjoyed about school and which changes would help make their experiences more worthwhile. Obviously, more research is needed in investigating the school experiences of different groups of SEND, particularly of those with more complex needs attending mainstream English settings. Further research is also needed in identifying the mechanism that would enable all pupils to voice their views and actively encourage their participation in school decision making.

References

Adderley, R. J., Hope, M. A., Hughes, G. C., Jones, L., Messiou, K., & Shaw, P. A. (2015) 'Exploring inclusive practices in primary schools: focusing on children's voices.' *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 30 (1), pp. 106–121.

Author, (2017)

Author (2018)

Blackman, S. (2011) 'Using pupil perspective research to informa teacher pedagogy:

what Carribean pupils with dyslexia say about theaching and leaning'. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 11 (3), pp. 178-185.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology.' *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (3), pp. 77–101.

Breakwell, G., Hammond, S., Fife-Schaw, C., & Smith, J. (2006) *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Research methdos in psychology*. London: SAGE.

Cefai, C., & Cooper, P. (2010) 'Pupils without voices: the unheard accounts of secondary school pupils with social, emotional and behaviour difficulties.' *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 25 (2), pp. 183–198.

Department for Education (2001). *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act*. London: DfE.

Department for Education (2018) *Permanent and Fixed-period Exclusions in England: 2016 to 2017*. London: DfE

Department for Education (2018) *Special Educational Needs in England: January 2018*. London: DfE

Department for Education (2014) *How Ofsted inspects further education teaching and training*. London: DfE.

Department for Education & Department of Health. (2014). *Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years*. London: DfE.

Department for Education and Employment (1997) *Green Paper: Excellence for All Children: Meeting Special Educational Needs.* London: HMSO.

Department for Education and Skills (2001) *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice*. London: DFES

Fleming, J. (2013) 'Young People's Participation - Where Next?' *Children & Society*, 27, pp. 484–495.

Giroux, Henry A. & McLaren, P. (1986). 'Teacher education and the politics of enagement: The case for demoncratic schooling', *Harvard Educational Review*, 56 (3), pp. 213-238.

Goodman, R. (1997). 'The Strenghts and Difficulties Questionnaire: A Research Note'. *Journal of Child Psychology abd Psychiatry*, 38 (5), 581-586.

Hatton, L. A. (2013) 'Disciplinary exclusion: the influence of school ethos.' *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 18 (2), pp. 155–178.

Kubiak, J. (2017) 'Using "voice" to understand what college pupils with intellectual disabilities say about the teaching and learning process.' *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 17 (1), pp. 41–48.

Loyd, D. (2013) 'Gaining views from pupils with autism about their participation in drama classes.' *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 43 (1), pp. 8-15.

Messiou, K. (2006) 'Understanding marginalisation in education: The voice of children.' *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 21 (3), pp. 305–318.

Mitra, D. L. (2004) 'The Significance of Pupils: Can Increasing "Pupil Voice" in

Schools Lead to Gains in Youth Development?' *Teachers College Record*, 106 (4), pp. 651–688.

Murray, C., & Greenberg, M. T. (2001). 'Relationships with teachers and bonds with school: Social emotional adjustment correlates for children with and without disabilities.' *Psychology in the Schools*, 38 (1), pp. 25–41

Norwich, B., & Kelly, N. (2004) 'Pupils' views on inclusion: moderate learning difficulties and bullying in mainstream and special schools.' *British Educational Research Journal*, 30 (1), pp. 43–65.

O'Connor, M., Hodkinson, A., Burton, D., & Torstensson, G. (2011) 'Pupil voice: listening to and hearing the educational experiences of young people with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD).' *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 16 (3), pp. 289–302.

Quinn, S., & Owen, S. (2016) 'Digging deeper: Understanding the power of "pupil voice."' *Australian Journal of Education*, 60 (1), pp. 60–72.

Robson, C. (2011) *Real World Research* (3rd edn). UK: Wiley.

Saldaña. (2013) *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd edn). Los Angeles; London: SAGE.

Sellman, E. (2009) 'Lessons learned: pupil voice at a school for pupils experiencing social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.' *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 14 (1), pp. 33–48.

Sheffield, E. L., & Morgan, G. (2017). 'The perceptions and experiences of young people with a BESD/SEMH classification.' *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 33 (1), pp. 50–64.

UNESCO (1994) *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*. Paris: UNESCO.

United Nations (2006) *Convention on the Rigths of Persons with Disabilities*. New York: United Nations.