



# Listening to the learner

**Anita Devi and Margo Mackay** explain how they seek the views of children and young people with communication difficulties

**For those involved in the Pathfinder programmes, the reforms in the new Children and Families Act have proved a radical new way of working.**

Whilst an outcomes-based approach is reminiscent of Every Child Matters, the reforms bring with them a deeper sense of child and family engagement than ever before. Co-production of the Local Offer and Education, Health and Care plans (EHC plans) is not just an ideological concept, but the practical implementation of open and genuine dialogue. Tools such as one-page profiles and person-centred planning meetings and reviews help to bring this about, and in time will become part of the norm. (See *The single EHC plan, Special Children* 214.)

But what about the children and young people for whom communication is a barrier? How can we enable them to make their voices heard and participate fully in the decision-making process?

This article explores this challenge from the perspective of a former teacher, now an educational consultant, who has contributed to the work of the South East 7 SEND Pathfinder Partnership; and an experienced speech and language therapist who conducted a research study into the effectiveness in Scottish schools of the communication tool Talking Mats, and developed a Talking Mats resource based on her findings.

## **Lessons from experience: Anita Devi**

As a teacher, I always encouraged open discussion and regularly sought the children's views about different aspects of their learning, the curriculum and school life in general, as well as anything else that was on their mind. However, that was not always easy, as my experience with one particular group of children illustrates.

## **Diversity and deprivation**

I was teaching in a primary school at the time and my class included four children with statements, five who were gifted and talented and a boy on his fifth school, having been excluded from the previous four. It was a diverse group in a deprived part of the town. A significant number of pupils came from dysfunctional families and it was quite normal for them to have experienced a family row before breakfast or to arrive in class without having eaten at all.

For some children, the last conversation they had held was in school the day before. Lacking language-rich environments at home, they struggled to communicate their ideas, views and feelings. Many of them arrived at school in an emotional state that was not conducive to learning. Asking them to talk about it was a non-starter and often resulted in a sulk, a tantrum, or complete silence for the whole day.

“**Lacking language-rich environments at home, children struggled to communicate**”

## **Bubble Time for talking**

To encourage the children to open up, I introduced Bubble Time. I created a laminated heart and hung it in the classroom beside 32 pegs, each one labelled with a child's roll call number on the register. At the centre of the heart was the statement: 'I need some Bubble Time with Ms Devi.' I used numbers rather than names because, while the children all knew their own number, they didn't know each other's and this made it easy for them to be discreet.

If something had happened that morning or the night before, or even that day in school, they would come in, take their numbered peg and clip it to the heart. In this way, while taking the register, I could easily see how many children wanted to talk to me or my teaching assistant.

Once the class had settled to work, I would sit down with those

who needed Bubble Time. We had rules: no one was to disturb us and if anyone got stuck with a task, they would try to figure it out for themselves or ask their peers. This approach proved very effective and not once was it abused. The children valued the opportunity to unburden and respected others when they needed that time too.

### The children's point of view

As classroom dialogue began to make steady progress, I turned my attention to unstructured times. Invariably, with such a diverse year group, playtimes and lunchtimes always resulted in 'a situation'. I decided that a good way to manage this was by turning the conversation into a personal, social and health education (PSHE) learning opportunity for the whole class.

That was with my teacher's hat on, but I had forgotten to see things from the children's perspective. As it happened, the school was participating in an action research programme where pupils were asked to rate their teachers on a range of key attributes. One of these was fairness.

Now, I have always thought of myself as being fair in the classroom, but that wasn't the view of some of my pupils. When I explored the reasons for this, they told me that they didn't see why they all had to be involved in a discussion about the playground issues when it only concerned some of them. Perceptions hey!

### Listening can turn things round

While these examples are from a primary environment, listening is important whatever the age of your pupils.

Earlier in my career I taught mathematics in a secondary school where staff had to complete reports for the students every eight weeks. If the students were subjected to scrutiny with such regularity, it seemed only fair that they give me feedback on my teaching too.

I placed a notebook at the front of the room and invited them to write comments, with a promise of no recriminations. One lad, whose learning was causing me concern, observed: 'Miss, you think when I slouch, fidget, look at the window I am not learning... but that helps me concentrate and think.'

I learned to zone out those external behaviours and he went on to achieve a very good result. More importantly, our relationship improved purely because, in his eyes, I had made the time to listen to someone who wasn't very communicative.

### Lessons from experience: Margo Mackay

As a therapist working in schools with young people with additional support needs, I was actively involved in seeking the views of pupils about the important issues in their lives. We used a structured interview approach where the pupil (with the interviewer's help if necessary) completed a standard review form, which informed our planning processes and reviews.

However, I became increasingly convinced that a more holistic approach was needed, one that supported real communication and reduced the likelihood of pupils just telling us what they thought we wanted to hear. I wanted to be confident that the conversations I held with students would produce a true and accurate record of their views.

### Visual scaffolding and thinking space

My starting point was the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (children and youth version), a framework developed by the World Health Organisation for describing the functional impact of impairment. Using this to inform my decisions, I identified three topics for discussion: my body, activities and participation, and environment.

To facilitate the conversation, I made three sets of symbols



for Talking Mats, a well-established communication tool that uses carefully thought out picture symbols to support people to understand, consider and express their views.

Three symbols are placed at the top of the mat: a happy face, an unhappy face and one that represents the midpoint between the two. Taking one aspect of the chosen topic at a time, the facilitator hands the young person an image, asks them to consider how they feel about it, and then place it on the mat. The example (above) shows the feelings of an eight-year-old boy when exploring 'my body and skills'. He appears to be happy or undecided about most aspects of this area of his life with one exception – homework.

By taking the pressure off face-to-face interaction, placing the focus on the mat and providing visual scaffolding to create a thinking space, I was able to increase the quality and quantity of the information obtained. The approach gave me a visual picture of what was going well in pupils' lives as well as any problems they faced, opened up topics for discussion and provided insights that would otherwise have remained hidden.

### Involving children in organisational decisions

It has become standard practice for schools to involve children in interviews and whole-school decisions via the student council, or even to seek out their views when reviewing staff performance. The question remains, how to ensure that children with speech, language and communication needs can play a full part?

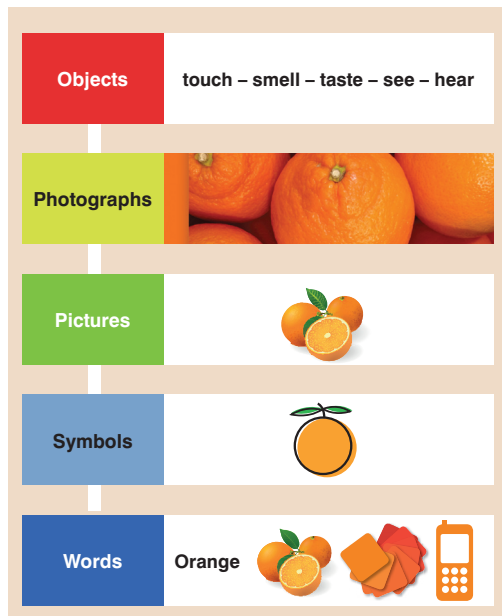
When recruiting a new member staff, one school found an effective way of engaging these pupils in the process of drawing up the person spec. The children were presented with two life-sized silhouettes – one representing their ideal candidate, the other the sort of person they didn't want to see – and invited to allocate qualities and traits to each one. They could stick on pre-prepared pictures and words or develop their own ideas through writing, drawing or any other method they wished. In this way everyone was able to participate, irrespective of communication challenges.





### The hierarchy of language

When supporting students to communicate, it is important to understand the hierarchy of language. The model (below) was constructed by Ms Devi in 2008 to help teachers think about the visuals they use.



Initially children use all five senses to identify an orange. In time, they begin to associate 2-D photos with real objects. Later they learn that a realistic picture can represent the photo, which in turn represents the object.

Symbolic understanding comes next, followed by word association. At the word understanding level, children use contextual cues to discern whether 'orange' refers to the fruit, the colour or the mobile phone company.

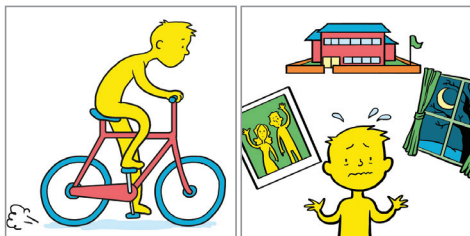
So the question for teachers is: how might this affect the way you plan or engage the children in giving their views?

### Things to consider

When gaining a child's views, the principles which underpin the Talking Mats framework will help you to support improved communication.

### Language demands and symbolic understanding

You can use symbol sets in different ways depending on the needs of the individual concerned. If the person experiences difficulty understanding language or has cognitive problems, start with a concrete topic such as activities or the foods that they like.



The first symbol (above) is obviously cycling; the second, which is more abstract, is about managing stress. Visual images act as a starting point for children to respond at their own level. The symbols make abstract ideas easier to understand.

Using a visual framework enables the interviewer to explore a

range of issues without using complex questions. The child is more likely to respond because the language demands are reduced.

### Choices

A Talking Mat allows the child to communicate their views without words. If they can talk, they can choose to elaborate or not, depending on how they feel. If a difficult issue arises, it may be enough for the child to place it on the 'negative' side of the mat.

The three symbols placed at the top can represent whatever values you wish to give them, for example: like/dislike, managing/not managing, important/not important.

### Facilitator role

Posing the open question, 'How do you feel about...?' is far more productive than asking, 'Do you like...?', which may only elicit 'Yes' or 'No' without leading any further. Try and keep your language consistent and allow the child lots of time to process the information and respond. Hand over control by allowing them to place the symbols on the mat. Take note of all verbal and non-verbal communication.

### The last word...

#### Ms Devi

Facilitating communication boils down to knowing your children and being imaginative in creating a listening culture within the learning environment. Teaching an elective mute in reception class once, I brought in a caterpillar habitat. The little girl would watch the caterpillar daily and was especially vigilant while it was encased in its cocoon. Her patience paid off, and she was the first to see the butterfly emerge in full colour and splendour. From that day on she began to talk!

#### Ms Mackay

Using a holistic, visual tool has helped my therapy become more effective. I have learned not to make assumptions about what is important to the young person, to keep an open mind and learn from their insights. Supporting children to communicate effectively means using all modes available, including signing, high-tech and low-tech aids. For children whose lack of symbolic understanding prevents them from expressing their views unless they are participating in an activity, I try to find creative ways of recording their enjoyment or displeasure so they can still be included in a meaningful, person-centred way.

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### Find out more

- Talking Mats is available in its original format or in digital form for computers or tablets. Read about the methodology and watch it in action: [www.talkingmats.com](http://www.talkingmats.com)
- Read the full report of Margo Mackay's research into the effectiveness of Talking Mats to enable students to take part in planning their education: [bit.ly/sc218-15](http://bit.ly/sc218-15)