

## **The Voice of the Child with Disabilities and/or Special Educational Needs and the Individual Education Planning process: A dual focus on pupil rights and empowerment**

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### **Introduction**

This summary article focuses on the rights of the child with disabilities and/or Special Educational Needs (SEN), with due regard for the Individual Education Planning process. Such rights are discussed in relation to the voice of the child, and in particular, pupil empowerment.

Recent years have witnessed a seismic shift towards recognising the importance of the voice of the child in society. In particular, national policy documents have highlighted the need to listen to the views of children and young people, to value their contribution within society and to recognise their role as citizens (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014, 2015; Government of Ireland, 2000). The inclusion of the voice of the child can be viewed from a rights-based perspective, aligning strongly with the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 1989). In addition, solid links have been recognised between voice and overall child development. Specifically, 'listening to and involving children and young people' has been recognised by the DCYA (2014, p. vi) as one of the key transformational goals in supporting children "...to realise their maximum potential now and in the future".

Concerning children with disabilities and/or special educational needs (SEN), research highlights that their voices have traditionally been associated with social exclusion, marginalisation and segregation (Finnvold, 2018; Koller, Le Pouesard, & Rummens, 2018). In recent years there have been efforts to address this shortfall on both national and international levels. In particular, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with

Disabilities (UNGA, 2006) highlights the rights of such children to express their views freely on all matters affecting them, on an equal basis with other children, and to be provided with disability and age-appropriate assistance to realize that right. Despite Ireland's ratification of this convention in March 2018, it remains questionable the degree to which the Convention and its predecessors (e.g. UNGA, 1989) have positively impacted on school-wide practices to date. On one hand, research shows some positive practices in relation to the inclusion of the voices of children with disabilities/SEN within schools, such as pupil attendance at individual education plan (IEP) meetings (Prunty, 2011). Other findings reveal more negative educational practices, including pupil exclusion from IEP meetings and adult-dominated decision-making (Griffin, 2018; Rose, Shevlin, Winter et al., 2015). Although a range of national policies recommend the importance of including the voice of the child in the IEP process (e.g. National Council for Special Education, 2006), the lack of guidance for schools remains a significant barrier. This is further magnified by the range of competing demands placed on schools and education staff, where the child-centred rhetoric of the primary school curriculum does not always play out in practice (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2010).

### **The Empowerment Process Model**

Reflecting on such issues, this paper argues that greater emphasis needs to be placed on the links that exist between pupil voice and overall child development. Rather than viewing the inclusion of pupil voice as yet another mandate on schools, this process needs to be framed as a significant learning opportunity for the child with disabilities/SEN; a process that can bestow greater levels of personal control on the child and move him/her towards higher levels of empowerment. In this regard, *The Empowerment Process Model* requires review. This model, presented by Bennett, Cattaneo and Chapman (2010), builds on prior work in the field, including concepts such as mastery, agency, self-efficacy, self-advocacy, self-determination, and self-regulation. In particular, the model articulates the process of empowerment across six key components, enabling its application across both research and practice. Specifically, the model defines empowerment as:

An iterative process in which a person who lacks power sets a personally meaningful goal oriented toward increasing power, takes action toward that goal, and observes and reflects on the impact of this action, drawing on his or her evolving self-efficacy, knowledge, and competence related to the goal. Social context influences all six process components and the links among them (Bennett Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010, p. 647).

An analysis of the model by the author highlights strong alignment between its six key elements and a range of aspects within the IEP process. These aspects include setting personally meaningful goals with the child, ensuring all goals are SMART (i.e. Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timed [National Council for Special Education, 2006]) , and that the monitoring of IEP outcomes is part of a dynamic process of identification, target-setting, intervention and review (Department of Education and Skills, 2017; National Council for Special Education, 2006). It is argued that if pupil empowerment is to be fully realised within the IEP process, greater attention is needed in relation to the interaction between internal child factors (i.e. self-efficacy, knowledge and competence) and the social context of the school, as proposed within the model (Bennett Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

Including the voice of the child in the IEP process is not only a right but is also a key means of supporting a child's development and moving him/her towards increased empowerment in the education process. Such development extends beyond the formal curriculum to encompass many elements of the informal curriculum, including independence-development, emotional well-being and lifelong skill development (Douglas et al., 2012). Notably, the development of such life skills has been recognised as vitally important for people with disabilities to ensure that they are appropriately prepared for life after school (National Disability Authority & National Council for Special Education, 2017). Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that including the voice of the child with disabilities/SEN is a complex process that requires greater attention within education, including increased training and guidance for educators. Ultimately, including the voice of the child in decisions that affect him/her must be done in a meaningful, considered manner if it is to truly realise

the child's fundamental human rights whilst concurrently, empowering him/her in the process.

*This article presents as a summary of a larger paper which explores pupil voice and the alignment of the Empowerment Process Model with the child's position in the IEP process. This paper is due to be published by the author over the coming year.*

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