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Realising child voice: the development of Cue Cards

ANN LEWIS, HELEN NEWTON and SUSAN VIALS

There has been lively and continuing interest worldwide about how best to ensure that all children, and, in particular, children with special needs or disabilities, have their views heard. In the UK, successive legislation across children's services has made this increasingly important. Children's views are even a part of the formal evaluation of many services (such as reviews and inspections of peripatetic support services in education). Making such processes 'real' rather than token requires that we find effective ways through which all children can share what they feel about their schools, services and provision. This article describes a technique using a small number of card pictures (eight) to prompt ideas about key elements of a narrative. We suggest that this approach, which has been tried and tested in depth in a local authority (as well as in various research projects), has considerable application in teaching and assessment with diverse children and young people across various contexts. We include examples to illustrate the versatility and value of the approach for schools and other services.

Keywords: pupil voice, visual prompts, inclusion.

Background and rationale

The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) called for state parties to: 'assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child' (article 12). The UNCRC assumed, broadly, that there are no boundaries, i.e. that (ultimately) hearing children's voices as users of services is a reasonable goal for all children. The UNCRC does include, in passing, reference to recognition of the impact of developmental level. This point has not generally been taken up as it has been obscured by the much stronger reference to, and interpretation of, the UNCRC as essentially a rights-based document. In the UK, as elsewhere, there has been a torrent of initiatives stressing the importance of service providers hearing children's views about their services. However, although children's participation is, in principle, high on the agenda for all providers in children's services, effective and authentic child participation is not easy to achieve in practice.

Challenges

Hearing children's views, particularly in relation to children with special needs or disabilities, presents significant challenges (Lewis and Porter, 2004, 2007). First, there are indications that commentators and professionals are beginning to express some disquiet about what is possible and reasonable in this context (Hart, 2002). For example, Felce (2002), with reference to people with learning difficulties, has raised concerns: 'Obtaining the views of people with learning difficulties – even those with severe or profound intellectual impairment – is becoming a ubiquitous imperative'. We should, he suggested, be much more cautious than we usually are about assuming the validity of views passed on via proxies or facilitators (Ware, 2004).

Second, there is a danger that the pressure arising from the welter of policy initiatives leads to an over-formalising and/or an over-pressurising of the process of hearing the views of children, perhaps particularly those with disabilities or difficulties. The presence of assigned support workers, signers or translators may (despite good intentions) be, or be seen by the child, as making obligatory a response of some kind. (See Alderson and Morrow, 2004; Clegg, 2004; Lewis and Lindsay, 2000; for reviews of ethics and consulting with children.) There has also been a wide range of questionnaires aimed at ascertaining the pupil view, for example the 'Pupil Attitude to School and Self Survey' (P.A.S.S.), but these highly structured approaches may distort pupil views through the nature and phrasing of the questions.

Ways to hear children's views

In the light of these challenges, this paper reports work on the use of Cue Cards which, drawing on extensive UK-based

development, has been found to be highly effective in facilitating the eliciting of views from a broad spectrum of children including many whom (through emotional, behavioural, cognitive or sensory factors) adults may not have expected to give such full information. The cards also provide a structure which, while scaffolding elicitation processes and responses, do not constrain or bias. The approach accords with the underlying principles, in work on child 'voice', of authenticity, credibility and trustworthiness (Lewis, 2002, 2005). It is a positive and practical response to the challenges noted above and complements more open-ended approaches. It accords well with accounts of visual methods to mediate communication with children with autism. Preis (2007), for example, notes the value of the non-transience of iconic picture systems for these children. More widely, and beyond the scope of this paper, underlying issues concerning methods of eliciting views resonate with debates concerning visual methodologies (including art, photographs and video) (Wall and Higgins, 2006; Wall *et al.*, 2005; Rose, 2007).

In Leicester City Local Authority (LA) a group of teachers and teaching assistants with a shared interest in supporting pupils with SEN (see Note) worked together as the Cue Cards Working Group. Two years of development work (2004–6) by this working group resulted in the refinement of the Cue Card approach and in examples of the successful use of Cue Cards across a range of contexts. The working group based their approach on the premise that if pupils learned to use the cards in a wider context this would improve their spoken and written language and it would also mean that those pupils had developed the skills to use the cards for the expression of more sensitive or personal views. The group did not explore the use of the cards to elicit sensitive views and concerns from the pupils; the members explored how to teach and use the cards in a more generalised fashion. The examples included below show how the spoken and written language of some pupils improved through the use of Cue Cards.

The Cue Card approach

Cue Cards provide highly specific structured visual prompts, ideally free of verbal leads from the interviewer, when eliciting children's versions of events. The cards were originally used by psychotherapists investigating cases of suspected child abuse; hence the stress on full and truthful responses. The initial set of Cue Cards comprised six cards (representing triggers for ideas about place, people, feelings, talk, actions and consequences). Each card depicted a simple black and white symbol, designed to avoid any leading material (Lewis, 2002, 2005). The rationale was derived from Fivush's script theory (cited in Lewis, 2002) concerning consistent key elements in a narrative.

Three aspects of the approach are important from both theoretical and practical perspectives. First, all potentially important aspects of the event were addressed (place, feel-

ings, actions, etc.); second, this was done systematically; and third, the way in which this was done encouraged as full and as truthful an account as possible. The theoretical literature on interviewing children indicated that recurrent questioning, adult intervention and distracting details all hamper children from giving their views. Hence the simplified and focused approach behind Cue Cards.

The revised set of eight Leicester Cue Cards developed by the working group varied slightly from the original six-card set described above. First, for the Leicester Cue Cards, only one version of the place card was used (the original version had both an indoor and an outdoor Cue Card picture on separate cards). Second, pilot work with the original set indicated that it would be helpful to have an additional card showing time (interestingly, this was omitted completely in the original set). Third, the consequences card in the original set (a broken window) was found to be very difficult for many children (particularly those with learning difficulties) to interpret. After trying out various alternatives with a range of children, the working group arrived at two cards ('end' and 'consequence'; see below) as a more effective alternative.

The Leicester Cue Cards are:

place people time feeling

talk action end consequence
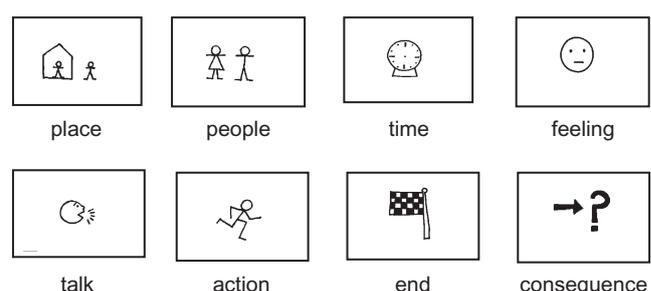
Using the cards

In using the cards, two key principles in order to use the cards successfully became apparent to the working group. Firstly children needed to be taught systematically how to use the cards and each card needed to be carefully explained and practised. There is good evidence that children will give fuller responses if their narrative is not interrupted; therefore they must be confident in the independent use and manipulation of the cards. Secondly, the presentation of the Cue Card must give the child an unspoken prompt; therefore adults working with the children have to demonstrate a willingness to listen and an understanding of the importance of reducing adult talk to an absolute minimum. This principle is paramount in a move away from the rigid and limiting question–answer–response format of much adult–child talk.

The working group found that the preliminary work spent teaching children how to use the cards was essential to their success but they found that it was neither possible nor desir-

able to script, or to prescribe exactly, how the cards are taught; effective use will respond to the needs and responses of the group or individual. It is not possible to be specific about the correct way to use the cards but the working group identified a number of useful pointers for teaching children how to use the cards. These include:

➢ Introduce the cards one at a time.
➢ Allow children the opportunity to handle the cards.
➢ Encourage talk about what children think the cards may mean.
➢ Work with a limited selection for a period of time, for example, people, action, and feeling cards only.
➢ Allow children thinking time.
➢ Frequently remind the children, and the adult leading the activity, that the adult is there to support the use of the cards (not to ask questions!).
➢ Use non-verbal prompts (a nod towards a card or gentle point) as soon as possible.
➢ Model using the cards to recount a story or to give information to the class.
➢ As the children gain experience, allow them to choose cards from the selection about which to talk (so creating their preferred sequence).

This work with the cards can be done with a whole class, with a group or with individuals. Starter activities were also used by the group, including lotto games using the card images and 'passing the card' in circle time, e.g., pass the action card and each child thinks of an action, etc.

Once pupils understand the cards then there are different ways in which to use them. The use of the cards with individuals, groups or whole classes was not constrained by a rigid format but whatever method was used was always shared with the pupils and then used consistently. When working with an individual or small group, the method could be to:

➢ place all the cards on the table and ask the pupil to pick up each card and then use it as a prompt;
➢ place the cards on the table one at a time;
➢ give the cards to the pupil to hold and encourage them to put the card on the table as they use it to prompt talk;
➢ display the cards on a laptop computer.

For individual or small group work, the cards were either A5 or A6 in size.

When working with a large group or whole class, the method could be to:

➢ display the cards and encourage pupils to use them as a visual rather than tactile prompt;
➢ display large cards on the wall and point to the one about which the child will talk;
➢ scan the cards and use them on an interactive white board.

For whole-class work, the cards were A4 or larger.

Much of the evidence from the working group was formative and qualitative as the group worked in a developmental way rather than following a rigid research design. The following four examples demonstrate the effectiveness of the Leicester City Cue Cards. These show:

1) the difference between a child's spoken language without and then with the use of Cue Cards;
2) how a child has used the cards to sustain a narrative;
3) the difference in a seven-year-old child's written work without and then with the use of Cue Cards;
4) how the use of the cards elicited a significantly improved written output from a Key Stage 1 child.

Example 1
The teacher worked with one Year 2 child, Kim, and sat opposite him at a small table. The teacher asked the child to 'tell me what you did at the weekend'.

Without Cue Cards, Kim responded:

I went to the Circus. I gone on a donkey and on the park . . . that's it.

The teacher then laid the Cue Cards on the table in front of Kim and asked the same question again. Kim picked up the cards (which he had used before) and talked to each card in turn. The cards he chose are shown in parentheses.

I went to the Circus with Rick and Mary. (People card) *Then I went (with) Mary and Rick and me.* (Time card) *Quarter past eight.* (Feelings card) *Sad and happy. I was happy. Running to the Circus and Mary think we miss it. We weren't late. We watched all of it. We didn't feed the tigers or the lions.* (Talk card) (Action card) *Now I told you something. I said thank you and please so I could go on the donkey and the pony. And you know they don't walk properly the donkeys. They go like that [wobble action] they wobble a bit like that.* (End card) *I gone home and played on my computer.* (Consequence card) *I went home, sat down a minute and played on my computer. That's it.*

This example shows the extended and enriched talk that resulted from the use of the Cue Card prompts.

Example 2
Here the Cue Cards were used to support talk, this time with a small group of children in a special school context. The group included a Year 3 child (X) who had severe communication difficulties and was on the autism spectrum. The teacher held up the following cards in turn: people, place, time, action, say, feeling, end, consequence. X was the first child in the group to be invited to tell a story to the rest of the group. the cards are shown in parentheses in the transcript below.

Once upon a time, there was a boy and a girl (People card) *and they just loved school* (Place card) *because it made them brainy (like fish fingers). It was 1/2 past 4* (Time card) *and then their work time was over. They ran* (Action card) *round a little bit and went back inside to get more brainy. When the teacher gave the questions* (Talk card) *they gave the correct answers to the maths problem and they were different answers. They were happy* (Feelings card). *And when school was out they went home and asked mum the question* (End card). *And they asked the question to mum and they got brainy again* (Consequence card).

The class teacher reported that when X used the cards he surprised her by sequencing a story, sustaining the narrative and moving away from the literal. He used vocabulary which she did not know he knew.

Example 3

Children who have difficulty with writing are often those for whom talk is also difficult. Therefore, for some members of the working group, it seemed like a natural progression to use the cards to support the written word. Examples 3 and 4 show this. Here a Year 2 child is retelling a story in writing, firstly without the use of Cue Cards.

Without Cue Cards:

Anancy and Drybone

Mr Drybone lived on top of a hill and wanted to marry Miss Louise. Anancy lived on the foot of the hill and wanted to marry Miss Louise too. Mr Drybone went to see Miss Louise and knocked on her door. I've brought a conjuring trick and I'm going to make you laugh. Miss Louise said 'This I've got to see'.

On the next occasion when the child was asked to retell a story the Cue Cards were spread on the table in front of him for reference. The resulting writing was as follows:

With Cue Cards:

Once upon a time in a big fur tree lived a rabit coled peter and his three sisters and his mother one day mrs rabit was going to the shop to buy some bread and buns the three sisters went to pick berys and peter hoe was a naughty rabit went stayt to Mr. mgregors gardn and sqeasd under the gate. He eat some radishes lettuce and some French beans and after that he felt sick so he went to find some parsly when he a found a qcumber house behind it he found Mr mggregor Mr mgregor chasd him saying stop theaf and he ran into the tool shed.

The second piece of writing includes time, feeling, consequence and end. The cards gave the child confidence through structure and resulted in a more varied and less restrained piece.

Example 4

In this last example a child (E) was asked to recount a school outing. The child was given the following Cue Cards: action, time, place, talk, consequence, end.

Our steam train trip

On Thusday I went on a steam train. We got on the bus at ten a cock. When we got there we went to the wtroom. Then the train cem. Athet that we got on the train. Aahet we sur llodewis. ten we got of the train and et gor lush. ten we went to the miniature ten we sur the livur. Ten we got on the train and went back to school. my fefut bit was wen we went to the miniature. my fetfht bit was gawin to the museum.

The child has used all the cards given except for 'talk'. The child's teacher commented that E made a significant improvement, was much more focused and was able to do much more writing. Perhaps the teacher's most significant comment was that E didn't panic when asked to write. The support of the cards had given E confidence.

Questions about the Cue Card approach

The above examples were ones which were brought to the working group and discussed. As the working group became more experienced and their application of the Cue Card approach developed, some important questions arose about using Cue Cards. These included:

Does it matter that the cards are open ended?

One issue that had to be dealt with by the working group was the relationship between the symbols on the cards and commonly used symbol systems. The Cue Cards differed from other symbol systems in that the cards are designed to be open ended. In contrast, many other approaches using Picture Communication Symbols (PCS), Makaton and Rebus (such as Widgit Writing with Symbols) deliberately have a specific meaning and are intended to lead to a more closed response. Consequently Cue Cards, as described here, may not be suitable for a child who has a limited symbol vocabulary and is concurrently learning a different (i.e. closed) symbol system.

Can the cards be used if children have a limited spoken vocabulary?

The use of the cards does not, in itself, increase a child's vocabulary. Therefore supporting (extension) activities may need to be used alongside or before the Cue Card work (particularly for 'feelings', 'action' and 'time') in order to maximise the child's response. Otherwise the child may understand the 'cue' and have ideas to express but not be able to put these into words.

How should the cards be presented?

Children's talk in response to the cards may result in rather disjointed and poorly structured talk. To help children to structure their talk more fluently, once they were confident with the cards, the working group found it useful to give children time to handle the cards. Providing children with more than one copy of each card also helped some to talk about, for example, feelings more than once in their dialogue.

Presentation of the cards varied by adult and by child; different approaches worked best in different situations. Sometimes cards were presented singly in turn and in the pre-specified sequence as in the original Cue Card work (because then the more comfortable aspects came first, e.g., place preceded feelings). At other times, and when children were very familiar with the cards, it was helpful to present these as an array. This gave the child control over which elements to talk about and in what order. However, this may mean that some elements are omitted and so generate a less full response. (We found that if all the cards were shown in an array, the children used them all!)

Is it useful to have several sets of cards?

For some children, it was particularly helpful to have several sets of cards which they could handle. This enabled them to return (e.g., to the 'feelings' element). This may be too distracting for children with moderate or severe learning difficulties.

Will the cards work well across various disabilities and special needs?

The working group found that the cards worked well with a range of pupils who could understand that one symbol might cue a number of responses. Children ranging from Year 1 in one of the most deprived wards in England to secondary aged pupils and those in a school for moderate and severe learning difficulties used the cards effectively with dramatically good results. Using the cards challenged teachers' expectations of limited language from some children. Most notably one teacher had great success with a child with autism who, in common with other children on the autistic spectrum, found it difficult to move away from a particular response to a particular card. (So, for example, if in one session the action card was associated with football in the playground, this same feature was triggered when the actions card was shown later in other contexts.) Using the cards, this child produced language which was more advanced than anything he had previously been heard to say in school.

Conclusion

The work described here has shown how the generalised use of Cue Cards can be used successfully to support spoken and written language. The account also illustrates that when more personal or sensitive views or issues are sought or discussed, the Cue Cards provided a tool without the restrictions and disadvantages of adult questioning. They complement other approaches which may be more open-ended but which, in combination, enable all children to share their views (Lewis, Parsons and Robertson, 2007; Lewis, Robertson and Parsons, 2005).

This account is intended not only to share information about the Cue Card approach and its effectiveness but also to highlight the creative potential for exciting and productive university–service/local authority relationships. The drive was the strong motivation of all those involved to improve practice around child 'voice'.

Note

The members of the Authority's (City of Leicester) working group were: Jan Hesketh, West Gate School; Sue Pesic-Smith, West Gate School; June Venables, Rowlatts Hill Primary School; Jannene Ceeney-Bird, Queensmead Community Primary School; Elaine Roberts, Bendbow Rise Infant School; Sue Vials, consultant teacher; Helen Newton, Ash Field School; Maureen Kemp, Ash Field School; Jan Heatley, Oaklands School; Gwen Tester, Slater Primary School; Pat Edwards, St Thomas More School; Scilla Gallop, Catherine Infant School. All schools are in Leicester City LA.

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Contact for further information concerning the Leicester Cue Cards
Helen Newton
Ash Field School
Broad Avenue
Leicester
LE5 4PY
Email: hnewton@ashfield.leicester.sch.uk

Correspondence concerning article
Professor Ann Lewis
University of Birmingham
School of Education
Birmingham
B15 2TT
Email: a.lewis@bham.ac.uk