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The views of students in the 14–19 phase attending three special schools and a secure unit on their learning and achievement

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The involvement of special schools and centres in curriculum policy initiatives has been remarkably limited both in the UK and internationally, and research investigating students' perspectives on the curriculum and teaching and learning in such centres is practically non-existent. The views of students on curriculum and pedagogy attending three special schools and a secure unit are explored and four key themes that emerged are discussed. It is proposed that aspects of the provision at the four special centres contribute to inclusive education practices.

Keywords: student voice; special schools; special educational needs; disability; curriculum; inclusive education

Background

Special schools and centres have an important contribution to make to school systems, however, their involvement in curriculum policy initiatives has been markedly limited both in the UK and internationally. Furthermore, there is an absence of research that explores students' views on teaching and learning in such centres. This article presents the perspectives of students on the 14–19 curriculum and associated pedagogy who attended three special schools and a secure unit. The investigation comprises part of the Centre Research Study (Baird et al. 2011; Elwood 2012) which set out to gauge the impact of the 14–19 educational reform programmes on schools, colleges and other centres in England.

Curriculum development for students with special educational needs and disabilities

Remarkably few studies have been conducted in the UK or internationally on curriculum initiatives for students with special educational needs and disabilities. Porter and Lacey (2005) comment on the dearth of this research. They reviewed international studies on students' learning difficulties over a 10 year period and found that investigations with a curriculum-related focus comprised only 'a tiny proportion' (41) of the research. Likewise, Miller and Morton (2007) refer to 'significant absences and silences' (163) in the international literature relating to special education curriculum policy. They propose that these silences and omissions may be present because curriculum initiatives that relate to special education have only started to be developed relatively recently and there may not have been adequate time for these to be

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studied. Lawson et al. (2005) draw analogous conclusions when commenting on the comparatively brief history of the development of the curriculum for pupils with severe and profound and multiple learning difficulties, pointing out that it was only after 1971 that responsibility for these children transferred from health to the education department in the UK.

In spite of the paucity of research on curriculum development for students with special needs/disabilities, some national UK curriculum schemes for these students have been developed. A far reaching example in the UK has been Foundation Learning, which is a key aspect of the 14–19 curriculum reforms Department for Education(DfE 2013). Foundation Learning aims to improve the skills of learners aged 14 and over through the development of credit-based qualifications at Entry level and level 1 within the Qualifications and Credit Framework (Ofqual 2013). Entry level qualifications recognise basic knowledge and skills and the ability to apply learning in everyday situations under direct guidance or supervision; level 1 qualifications similarly recognise basic knowledge and skills but encompass the ability to apply learning with just *some* guidance or supervision, and learning activities may be linked to job competence. A welcome aim of Foundation Learning is to enable schools to accredit the skills acquired by students with learning difficulties – skills that in the past were often not officially acknowledged. However, a number of concerns have been raised about Foundation Learning and Rudd (2009) noted that there appeared to be uncertainty about the long-term future of this policy initiative. When Ofsted (2011) investigated provision for students with learning difficulties in post–16 centres their evaluation report expressed unease about the tendency of Foundation Learning programmes to be too narrowly focused on gaining accreditation, that there was a lack of opportunity for practical, hands-on experiences in realistic settings and that the programmes were not effective in ensuring that students progressed to employment or to independent living. Wolf (2011) has voiced similar concerns about this initiative. She notes that although Foundation Learning is a constructive attempt to develop a curriculum suited to the needs of low-attaining young people, there is a danger that it will legitimise failure for a significant proportion of these students as the currency of Foundation Learning qualifications is dubious and students may collect qualifications just for the sake of having more awards. Furthermore, Wolf asserts that it is apparent from international comparisons that the sizeable proportion of students in English schools/centres who are not capable of progressing on to level 2 post–16 programmes (including GCSEs as well as a wide range of vocational awards) and who will probably not be able to secure jobs or apprenticeships is 'far larger than it needs to be' (Wolf 2011, 114). Level 2 qualifications are equivalent to General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) grades A* to C (the GCSE is an academic qualification awarded in a specified subject by students aged 14–16 and pass grades range from A* to G).

Student voice

One of the dilemmas facing researchers who seek the views of students on teaching and learning is *which* students to approach, and Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) comment that it can be tempting to include only those who are more academically successful as they may be more articulate when expressing their views. However these authors caution that as higher achieving students tend to be on the same 'wavelength' as schools about education and the curriculum, teachers may have less to learn from them, and it may be more beneficial to seek the views of students with weaker achievement profiles:

> Teachers have more to learn from those students who have been relatively unsuccessful in school […] it is from them that teachers are most likely to learn things that might make the

> biggest difference to their teaching and to their students' commitment to learning […] (Rudduck and McIntyre 2007, 33–34).

Lundy, Byrne, and McKeown (2012) make a similar point about the importance of listening to young people with learning disabilities. Writing from a children's rights perspective, these authors point out that when such young people leave school there is no statutory obligation in Northern Ireland to take their views into account when important decisions are made about future provision. Cook–Sather (2006) discusses positive aspects of the 'student voice' movement and argues that a profoundly positive aspect is its focus on changing power imbalances between adults and young people. This is particularly relevant when working with young people with learning difficulties and students in alternative educational settings such as secure units, as they may have a relatively high level of dependence on others and a correspondingly low level of personal agency. The importance of eliciting the views of students with learning difficulties presents a powerful rationale for including the perspectives of students from special centres when conducting research on curriculum and qualification initiatives. However, it is worth bearing in mind Cook–Sather's (2006) warning that when 'student voice' is tokenistic and is viewed as a homogenous and uniform entity this risks neglecting essential differences between students and their needs.

Inclusive education

One of the perspectives that informs this study is the notion of inclusive education, which has been viewed as possibly the greatest challenge facing education systems internationally (Acedo 2008). Although it may appear surprising that inclusive education principles could enhance our understanding of the provision offered in segregated special centres, it should be borne in mind that the concept of inclusive education is evolving and that aspects of the support offered in special schools are increasingly being examined through an inclusive lens. Matsuura (2008) explains that although 'inclusive education' has traditionally been viewed as the integration of students with special educational needs and disabilities into mainstream schools, this is a narrow interpretation and a broader view is emerging. Although there is a lack of consensus on definitions of inclusive education (Berlach and Chambers 2011; Erten and Savage 2012), inclusive education principles now tend to be applied internationally to a much broader range of vulnerable children and young people (rather than just those with special needs/disabilities) and there is a drive towards schools becoming more accepting of students from diverse backgrounds who may experience a wide range of difficulties (Avissar 2012; Rix 2011). Halinen and Järvinen (2008) discuss this perspective and emphasise that inclusive practices in education increasingly embrace the principle that provision needs to be in place so that every child can learn effectively. Special schools and specialist centres such as secure units in the UK are well positioned to ensure that students are provided with effective resources and opportunities to access the curriculum, and this inclusive emphasis on all children and young people having opportunities to achieve successfully will be explored further when students' views on support for learning are considered.

Methodology

The present investigation was part of the Centre Research Study (Baird et al. 2011) which aimed to evaluate the impact of the 14–19 educational reform programmes on schools, colleges and other centres in England. This article is based on comments made by students in the 14–19 phase attending three special schools and a secure unit. Secure accommodation

is provided for young people generally between the ages of 10 and 18 who are likely to cause serious injury to themselves or others if placed in other forms of provision (Department of Health 1999). The secure unit was included with the sample of special schools as it is a separate, non-mainstream form of provision.

Visits to the four centres were made by the author and two members of the research team during 2009/10. All students from the four special centres were selected by school staff. The needs of students attending the four centres are markedly varied, and partly for this reason information about the provision offered at each of the four centres is provided in Table 1 (all names are fictitious).

When interviewing children and young people with severe learning difficulties and/or severe communication difficulties there are advantages in arranging for such students to be accompanied by a support worker whose role includes clarifying the children's responses when ideas are not clearly expressed (Woolfson et al. 2007). We considered potential problems that might arise, for example, that support workers might answer on behalf of students, and that students might be disinclined to express criticism of members of staff. However, it was decided that on balance the advantages of having support workers present outweighed the disadvantages and for this reason most of the children and young people we spoke to at the four centres were accompanied by support staff. A total of 19 students were interviewed (eight female and 14 male) either individually or in groups of two to four; and an observation of three Year 13 students was conducted by the author at Springwell school for students with severe learning and communication difficulties during a one-hour cookery lesson. This observation was arranged as it was considered by school staff that an interview might not enable these students to express their views effectively (only one direct quote is included below for a student from Springwell). Although the Springwell observation data differ from the interview and focus group data from the other three centres, they have been included as they provide an indication of the very high level of these students' needs and illustrate how students were successfully helped to access one aspect of the curriculum (cooking).

In order to evaluate the student interview schedule (in preparation for use in other special centres), a pilot phase was initially carried out at Southview special school in July 2009. These and later interviews lasted from 30–60 min and questions included: What kinds of learning activities do you like best? What kinds of activity help you learn most? What kinds of things at school or college make it most difficult for you to learn? Did you have a choice in the subjects/courses that you taking? What kinds of information and advice did you get to help you choose your subjects? It was concluded that the interview questions were appropriate for later use with other special centres (though these items should be regarded as a flexible guide rather than as a rigid set of questions that needed to be strictly adhered to) – for a full account of this phase of the research see Feiler (2010). As the student interview schedule was judged to be broadly relevant for other special centres, the students' views from the trial study at Southview school have been included in this paper.

The student interviews were recorded and the transcripts were initially analysed individually for emerging themes (Mason 2002) using NVivo software. These themes were then interconnected across participants from the four centres, producing a more developed set of categories. Finally, selective coding was applied and core themes were identified (Punch 2005; Robson 2011). It is worth noting that although the four special centres have some features in common such as small-group teaching, the provision offered in these four centres and the learning needs of the students are markedly diverse (as mentioned above). This raises a question about the extent to which it is appropriate to present student perspectives *across* these centres without referencing the type of needs experienced by the students.

Table 1. The four special centres participating in this study, and students interviewed/observed.

Centre	Provision	Student interviews
High Cross: Independent special school with provision for approximately 80 students aged 11–19 with communication difficulties associated with speech and language difficulties, hearing impairment or autistic spectrum disorders.	Year 10 and 11 students take a range of exam courses e.g. ASDAN (Awards Scheme Development and Accreditation Network). The school offers a GCSE Art course. Year 12 and 13 students attend credit-bearing courses at local colleges on subjects such as the creative and performing arts. Students can attend a local secondary school to take GCSE mathematics.	Individual interviews led by the author with three Year 11 students and a Year 13 focus group in the presence of a support worker.
Nortonside: A residential secure unit for up to 40 young people aged 11–19.	GCSE English, Maths, Science and ICT are offered. Vocational courses include plumbing/DIY skills, child care and gardening. Students tend to stay for brief periods so short modular courses are generally taught. Staff have developed educational enrichment programmes bringing into the centre a variety of services and provision from the local area. Most young people are male and in Years 10–12.	Four young people took part in two small group interviews conducted by a member of the research team (two students per interview), accompanied by a member staff.
Southview: Independent day and residential provision for approximately 100 students aged 3–19 with physical difficulties, almost all of whom have additional learning need.	The school has specialist status in sports and information and communication technology. ASDAN curriculum materials are used. A small number of students are entered for GCSE qualifications. Some students visit partnership schools; and students from nearby mainstream schools attend Southview on a part-time basis.	Two Year 10, and two Year 12 students were interviewed in pairs by the author. Support workers were not present.
Springwell: Maintained special school for approximately 70 students aged 3–19 with severe learning difficulties.	Foundation Learning level courses have been developed at the school, e.g. a photography course and a kitchen garden course. One partnership includes two upper schools and their feeder middle and primary schools; and another comprises other local authority special schools and a college of further education.	Three Year 11 students accompanied by a support worker attended a group interview conducted by the author. A one-hour observation of three Year 13 students was also carried out.

To address this, when the viewpoints of the students are provided, the type of provision attended will be identified (and as far as possible students' year group and gender). Furthermore, where analysis and commentary applies to students from a particular centre, this will be indicated. Two other points about the interviews are worth noting. First, inter-rater reliability was not evaluated through independent coding, so the author's identification of the themes within the data set was to some extent based on subjective interpretation, and this should be borne in mind. Second, the young people at Nortonside secure unit were educated and grouped according to the custodial regime rather than by Year group, and it is only possible to state that the students were from Year groups 10–12.

Four core themes emerged from the interviews with students at the four special centres: priorities at school, achievement and friendships, barriers to learning, preferences for practical activities and factors that support learning. Each of these core themes is discussed below. Selected direct quotes from the interviews are included and the use of three dots in square brackets […] indicates that some commentary from the students has been omitted for the sake of conciseness or clarity, and some words/phrases have been added in square brackets for clarification.

Priorities at school: achievement and friendships

A consistent theme to emerge across three of the four special centres (High Cross, Nortonside and Southview) was the importance that students attached to academic achievement, particularly in relation to preparing for college or other post-school provision or in connection with possible future employment. For example, when asked, 'What's the most important thing for you about coming to school?' the following response was made by a student from High Cross:

> I think it is important because the more education you get, you can get by, you can get a job in later years, which I think is important because the more knowledge you have, you can earn more money.
>
> (Female Year 11 student, High Cross school for students with communication difficulties)

Most of the young people interviewed at Nortonside secure unit had clear ideas about the jobs they planned to pursue later; as well as bricklaying these included apprenticeships in plumbing and seeking employment as a catering manager or chef. One of the students from Nortonside anticipated that the education he was receiving would improve his chances in securing employment:

> It [education] is an important thing for me personally. At first I didn't realise it was going to be that important. But like now, since I've got a bit older, I perceive it will actually help me later on […] Like find jobs and that.
>
> (Male Year 10–12 student, Nortonside secure unit)

At Southview special school (for students with physical difficulties and associated learning difficulties) the young people not only recognised the importance of academic achievement, they also underlined the importance of personal achievement in the field of sports. This school had been granted specialist status in sports and information and communication technology and both the Year 10 students interviewed at this school were gaining significant

recognition for their personal accomplishments with sports. One student had played boccia (a form of bowls) for the Great Britain team at the paralympics held during the previous summer; and the other student had participated in table cricket at national championship level and was successful in reaching the final at Lord's cricket ground.

When asked about the core purpose of attending school, as well as valuing academic and personal achievement, some students emphasised the importance of friendships. Many students have to travel significant distances to school and this may have contributed to friendships at school being particularly valued (in comparison with peer relations outside school). A student from High Cross commented:

> I mostly have more fun at school because I've got most friends at school here. Outside school I've only got two friends, but they're kind of busy all the time, so I prefer having more fun here at school, because I've got more friends and talk more better.
>
> (Female Year 11 student, High Cross school for students with communication difficulties)

Similarly, at Southview two students emphasised their appreciation of the friendships they had developed whilst attending this school:

> Interviewer: What's the most important thing about coming to school for you?
>
> Female student: Friends. I live about two hours away.
>
> Male student: And the same for me, having friends. At home I've got mates in my village, but I don't really have that many at home, they're either older or younger than me.
>
> (Year 12 students, Southview school for students with physical difficulties and associated learning difficulties)

Barriers to learning

Students were asked about barriers that might affect their learning. When invited to comment on factors that might hold her back academically, a student at High Cross mentioned other students' behaviour:

> I think probably distractions like people talking over me, or someone knocking me over […] Mostly other students.
>
> (Female Year 11 student, High Cross school for students with communication difficulties)

Another student at this school explained that although she was generally taught in a very small group (three students), she sometimes did not understand the terminology used by her teacher:

> I think if the teacher is expressing it in a difficult way then I may not understand it […] Using complex words, mainly.
>
> (Female Year 11 student, High Cross school for students with communication difficulties)

It is worth noting that when asked how she reacted in such circumstances this student explained that she would ask for help and that this would generally result in the teacher explaining the issue or topic more clearly.

At Nortonside secure unit there was a perception that the turnover of students and the brief periods spent in this provision could result in some students' curriculum needs not being met. This issue was raised by a student who commented that teachers may not pitch the work appropriately, because they may not be aware of the curriculum levels some students had reached:

> […] if there's a girl or a boy there that's not willing to tell the teacher, and no one knows what ability they're at, honestly they're not going to get anywhere are they? So they need to take time to get to know that child, or shall we say young person. You know, get time to know that young person and know what ability they are at […]
>
> (Female Year 10–12 student, Nortonside secure unit)

Preferences for practical activities

Another strong theme to emerge was a preference for hands-on, practical activities. Students at Nortonside secure unit referred to their enjoyment of subjects such as construction (plumbing and bricklaying), art, hairdressing, food technology, sports and motorbike training. Some of the courses taken by these students carried awards, e.g. a GCSE qualification in information technology and a diploma course in bricklaying. Though acknowledging that motivation and determination can play a strong part in achievement, a student at this unit highlighted her preference for lessons where there were practical elements:

> I think people prefer the practical stuff where you can get hands on and that, instead of being sat, you know like in a classroom just doing writing and that. But I think anyone in here can achieve what they want as long as they put their mind to it.
>
> (Female Year 10–12 student, Nortonside secure unit)

Students at Nortonside similarly echoed a preference for practical learning experiences that might enhance their employment prospects and the skills necessary for living independently. When asked about subjects at school and what was enjoyable, the following comment was made:

> It's brilliant [the education at Nortonside] because I've learnt like loads of stuff […] I've learnt quite a bit so when I get out I won't be as thick as I was beforehand […] I see all the practical stuff now that's been put in front of me […] and I think, well if I'm not prepared to do this, do you know what I mean, how can I look after myself?
>
> (Female Year 10–12 student, Nortonside secure unit)

There were some indications that students at Southview special school for students with physical difficulties and additional learning needs also preferred practical learning. When asked about subjects they enjoyed, two students at this school mentioned cooking, swimming and PE; and at Springwell when students were asked about their favourite subjects one student mentioned art, music and swimming and also added:

> Cooking, work, break time.
>
> (Male Year 11 student, Springwell school for students with severe learning difficulties)

At High Cross a student noted that although she sometimes found that learning by listening to staff was effective, on other occasions she preferred to learn by doing:

> I think the best way of me learning is sometimes by listening to others and sometimes doing it practically, like doing it, because I learn a lot from that […] In art this morning, we were doing ceramic pots and we were learning to transfer images onto the pot […] actually doing it, I've learnt so much from it.
>
> (Female Year 11 student, High Cross school for students with communication difficulties)

Factors that support learning

The students at the four special centres were asked about factors that support their learning. Their responses ranged across a variety of areas and these have been grouped under four sub-themes: the quality of teaching and teachers' interaction with students; the range of subject choices offered to students; small class sizes and the benefits of visiting other centres.

Quality of teaching and teachers' interaction with students

This sub-theme refers to students' comments about the clarity of instruction, the use of assessment and the style of teachers' interactions. Students very much appreciated teachers making lessons clear and explaining difficult terms. For example, a student at High Cross commented:

> The explaining, it's more better than it was when I first started, it's more better now […] I think English is my very low subject. I had problems […] with the explaining the words, and I found it really hard and I still do. But they explain it more better now […] Yeah, they go over things […] it helps me more better, I'm not so frustrated anymore, I'm more relaxed and calm.
>
> (Female Year 11 student from High Cross school for students with communication difficulties)

When commenting about the use of tests a student from High Cross emphasised the positive aspects of formative assessment at school and how tests can contribute to exam preparation:

> Yes, they [assessments at school] are a very good thing, because tests help you get ready for the exam, and when the exam actually comes, you can just put all your best into it and, yeah, just hope then that you pass.
>
> (Female Year 11 student, High Cross school for students with communication difficulties)

On the other hand, another student at the same school had some misgivings about the pressures tests can exert:

> Mostly, I don't like tests, really […] sometimes I do like it [testing], sometimes I don't. But mostly I don't really like tests […] it's just a lot of pressure revising.
>
> (Female Year 11 student, High Cross school for students with communication difficulties)

Regarding interpersonal relationships, at Nortonside secure unit students appreciated teachers who showed that they understood the pressure students were under and who avoided forming judgmental expectations:

> Male student: […] they [teachers] know exactly what background you came from and stuff like that, so they know exactly how to treat you.
>
> Female student: Yeah, they don't judge you […] they take you at face value.
>
> (Year 10–12 students, Nortonside secure unit)

Small class size

An issue that emerged across all four special centres was the size of teaching classes and students' appreciation of small group teaching. This was strongly apparent at Nortonside secure unit where students expressed surprise at the favourable staffing levels and an expectation that small class sizes might help them to make up academic ground:

> […] when I first came in I was just thinking, God it's gonna be crap, there's going to be a whole lot of kids in one lesson. But I actually found out two days after I had my induction, I actually found out that it was only two or three of them in a lesson.
>
> (Male Year 10–12 student, Nortonside secure unit)

> When I leave here I'm going to probably go back to school and start doing a bit more maths and English. And then go to college or university and do some exams on food tech or mechanics […] I think I can get on alright now that I've started off in here. With four kids [in a class] I think I could bring myself back up.
>
> (Male Year 10–12 student, Nortonside secure unit)

Two Year 12 students at Southview school for students with physical difficulties and additional learning needs similarly echoed a preference for being taught in small groups. One of these students explained that being taught in larger groups can be frustrating when other students take time to respond.

At Springwell a one-hour observation was arranged as it was decided that it would not be appropriate for the school's three Year 13 students to be interviewed because of the severity of their learning and communication difficulties. The author was invited to observe a cookery lesson during which the three students were assisted by three teaching assistants. The following observation note made at the time highlights the importance of small group teaching in this setting:

> To help one of the students choose between sugar and syrup, a little of each is placed on a spoon. He [Year 13 student] turns away from the syrup, then turns away from the sugar. This is taken as a preference for plain popcorn. Students [were] given a choice of a hot drink – tea or

> hot chocolate – in two packets. One student looks at the packet of chocolate more, and his eye-pointing is taken as a sign of preference. Given the severity of the students' needs (who are described as having complex and multiple learning difficulties), it is remarkable that their active engagement is sustained throughout the session, with opportunities for choice-making. [The students did not use spoken language to communicate during this lesson].

Although comments from the students at High Cross, Nortonside and Southview about class size generally attested to their appreciation of small group teaching, it is worth noting that one student felt that the relatively small size of the classes could be a constraint:

> There's only three students and a teacher […] I'd sometimes prefer it to be a little bit bigger […] Because it's nice learning with other students as well.
>
> (Female Year 11 student at High Cross school for students with communication difficulties)

Range of subject choices

Another factor mentioned by students when discussing processes that support academic achievement was their appreciation of the variety of subject choices on offer. Furthermore, students generally felt that they had been give sufficient information to make subject choices and that there was some flexibility in relation to these. For example at Southview a student commented:

> And we got asked what we would like to [do] next year. So we do get a choice. It was quite hard to choose. They're going to try and get me a separate lesson [to do] graphic design, because no-one else wanted to do it. And I swapped food tech for drama because I don't like it.
>
> (Female Year 12 student, Southview school for students with physical difficulties and additional learning needs)

Comments from students at Nortonside secure unit indicated the variety and breadth of subject choices available at this unit:

> Male student 1: It's like you can do trail bikes, cooking, sports, bricklaying, plumbing, music, art, gardening.
>
> Male Speaker 2: […] I like doing different things instead of being stuck with the same thing, maths and English all the time, or maths, English, science, history, it gets pretty boring.
>
> (Male Year 10–12 students, Nortonside secure unit)

Although a student at High Cross similarly emphasised that she was satisfied with the subject choices offered to her, she was uncertain about which decisions to make:

> I'm kind of happy with it, the choices. But, I don't know what to choose […] I like different stuff, and [I find it] really hard to choose. If I just liked one thing it would be easy, but it's hard to choose.
>
> (Female Year 13 student, High Cross school for students with communication difficulties)

Visits to other centres

Students strongly appreciated opportunities to visit other centres, commenting that such experiences help with academic achievement, with social interaction and with preparation for the process of transferring to post-school provision. For example, a student at High Cross referred to the value of visiting a local college because it helped her to realise what it might be like to attend to this centre after leaving school:

> Because it's a new experience and I want to know what college feels like. I'm one of those people who like to try it out first and then see if I still want to go or not.
>
> (Female Year 11 student, High Cross school for students with communication difficulties)

Another student at this school commented on the social benefits of visiting nearby centres:

> I like meeting new people as well instead of sticking with the same person, or people. Try, like, meet new people, in colleges.
>
> (Female Year 13 student, High Cross school for students with communication difficulties)

At Springwell school for children and young people with severe learning difficulties, a Year 11 male student commented that he enjoyed cooking when he visited a nearby college during two induction days. Another Year 11 male student at this school remarked that he particularly enjoyed visiting a science laboratory in a local secondary school – a learning support assistant explained that there was not a science laboratory at Springwell so arrangements had been made for students to use the laboratory in the nearby school for one afternoon a week.

Above all, students who visited local colleges appreciated the atmosphere in these settings and being treated like young adults. For example:

> […] it makes us, you know, feel like we're more grown up.
>
> (Female Year 13 student, High Cross school for students with communication difficulties)

As well as valuing opportunities to attend other centres, students at Southview welcomed the chance to meet students from nearby secondary schools coming *into* their school. They were aware that their school's specialist status in sports and its advanced sports facilities were probably instrumental in attracting such students:

> I think another thing as well that's good about being a sports college is bringing other schools into the school, and talking to them [visiting students] about how the sports coaching is and how good it is […] It does happen quite often, and since we've been a sports college it's happened more.
>
> (Male Year 10 student, Southview, for students with physical difficulties and additional learning needs)

Rose (2012) conducted research in the same four special centres during the Centre Research Study, focusing on partnership arrangements. She found that although staff were keen to develop partnership work around curriculum development, curriculum delivery and

enriching student experience, the opportunities to do so were limited. Nevertheless, staff valued the experiences students gained when attending mainstream provision as opportunities for students' social and emotional development.

Discussion

A number of the views expressed by the students from the four special centres complement themes that became apparent during the main Centre Research Study (Baird et al., 2011) and also with findings from previous research studies on student voice conducted in mainstream settings. A core issue that emerged in the present investigation from the interviews across all four special centres was the extent to which students valued academic and vocational achievement. In the main Centre Research Study in 2009/10, it transpired that across all the focus groups students consistently indicated that examinations, qualifications and getting good grades were one of the most important aspects of being in education (Baird et al. 2011). Another area prioritised in the current study by students attending the four special centres was the importance of friendship with their peers. The students focused more on friendships *within* their school and tended not to mention peer relations outside school. This same finding emerged from Lewis et al.'s research (2007) which detailed the experiences of children and young people with disabilities and their families in the UK. The authors comment that strikingly few of the case study children in their study referred extensively to peer relations outside school. In an earlier study, Lewis and her colleagues surmise that for some children and young people with disabilities the lengthy, isolating nature of journeys to school (whether mainstream or special) may have resulted in exclusion from neighbourhood peer groups and after-school activities (Lewis, Robertson, and Parsons 2005).

Regarding possible barriers to learning, some of the issues raised by the students in the current study reflect previous findings from research involving students in mainstream provision. For example, a student's concern about not understanding complex words used by teachers echoes findings from a study conducted in mainstream secondary schools by Flutter and Rudduck (2004). These authors report that students express apprehension about not understanding topics properly, about having insufficient time to follow new concepts and about getting left behind – a theme also raised by Duffy and Elwood (this issue) in relation to 'disengaged' students' experiences. It should not be surprising that students from special centres ascribe value and credence to academic achievement, just as other students do in mainstream settings. It is an important reminder that the curriculum content and the availability of appropriate qualifications *matter* for young people with special educational needs and disabilities. Just because such students may have 'learning difficulties' this does not justify the extent to which they and staff from special schools have been overlooked in debates about qualification development, and the extent to which research in the UK and internationally has tended to disregard this field.

It is increasingly accepted internationally that a core feature of inclusive education is ensuring that all children and young people have opportunities to learn and achieve successfully (Halinen and Järvinen 2008; Operatti and Belalcàzar 2008). In this sense, aspects of the provision offered in the four special centres could be viewed as making an important contribution to inclusive practices in that children and young people may have increased opportunities for accessing the curriculum at such centres. As noted above, the students in the special centres prioritised academic achievement and when asked about the purpose of schooling, they were positive about the small size of the classes and felt that this generally enhanced their learning experiences and access to the curriculum. Furthermore, students

across all four special centres showed appreciation of the help given by teachers and support workers to support their learning, and most commented positively on the helpful strategies teachers use to ensure that the lesson content was clear and understandable. Woolfson et al. (2007) conducted a study with students with severe learning difficulties and similarly found that there was strong appreciation of the support provided by teachers and the manner in which they interacted with students. Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) report that students in mainstream settings very much value positive teacher/pupil relationships. These authors found that when mainstream students' views were sought about the characteristics of effective teaching and they highlighted the importance of positive interpersonal relationships with understanding teachers who pay close attention to what students say. This chimes with the comments made by students at Nortonside secure unit who appreciated teachers who avoided forming judgemental attitudes and who seemed to understand the pressures they (the students) were under – students valued not only *what* is taught, but *how* teachers conduct themselves and interact with them. In a similar vein, when writing about 'disengaged' students, Duffy and Elwood (this issue) found that student–teacher relationships were a very important factor influencing the degree to which students participate/engage in the classroom.

As well as helping students to achieve successfully, another important aspect of inclusive practice for students attending special centres is the creation of opportunities for developing a sense of self-reliance and independence. From research in mainstream secondary schools we know that as students progress through school most increasingly value their self-sufficiency (Flutter and Rudduck 2004). Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) discuss this process and refer to students' 'aspiration for autonomy' (page 69), emphasising that students place a high premium on being respected by teachers and having their perspectives taken seriously. Teachers showing interest in students' views not only contribute to young peoples' sense of autonomy but also their appreciation of schooling. Gorard and See (2011) propose that enjoyment of secondary schooling tends to be enhanced by the perceived respect shown towards students by teaching staff. Writing about disabled students, Lewis et al. (2007) made similar points about the importance of creating opportunities to act independently and to make choices, as these are crucial to the process of such young people feeling empowered and being able to determine the direction of their lives. These authors also found that students leaving special schools emphasised the independence they needed to learn in order to 'move on' in life, that becoming independent from parents was a struggle but important, and that attending college had helped them to develop social skills as well as academic ones. These findings are similar to the viewpoints expressed by students in the current study – the young people very much valued the arrangements made for them to visit other centres not only because of the academic benefits (e.g. the science facilities available in a mainstream secondary school), but also because of the personal and social benefits (e.g. feeling more 'grown up' when visiting a nearby college). This chimes too with research reported by Ainscow (2007) who worked with a network of special school head teachers in England and found that some special school staff were attempting to work in partnership with mainstream schools and colleges in order to enhance the development of inclusive practices. It emerged that these arrangements had created opportunities for social learning within mainstream settings and had contributed to students' social confidence. It should not be surprising that, like students in mainstream schools, students with special educational needs and disabilities in special schools are motivated to seek independence and autonomy. In recent years, there have been increasing challenges to the personal 'tragedy' discourse that has tended to underpin expectations in the field of disability (for example, an expectation that young people with disabilities may not aspire to be as independent as other

young people), and there have been ardent calls for a shift away from a medical model that focuses on individuals' impairments to a social model that emphasises the need to remove social and environmental barriers (McCoy and Banks 2012; Siska and Habib 2012).

Students from the three special schools were positive about visiting other schools and colleges, partly because they felt such experiences helped them to prepare for leaving school. However, it is worth reflecting that post-school options open to young people in special schools can be markedly restricted. In a Norwegian study, Myklebust and Båtevikb (2009) found that young adults with special educational needs who had previously attended special schools were significantly less likely than students with similar needs in mainstream settings to find jobs that enabled them to become economically independent and earn a living. In her probing and critical article about choices for students leaving special school, Elson (2011) concludes that for those with more marked difficulties (for example, students with severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties), college places or courses appear to be either inadequate or not available. Similarly, Lundy, Byrne, and McKeown (2012) found that there is increasing concern about transition from school to adult services for young people with learning disabilities and that the options available can be markedly limited. This is a stark reminder that the majority of older students with severe learning difficulties considering 16–19 provision may have very little choice other than staying on at school. This lack of choice jars with conceptions of inclusive education that underline the importance of providing effective learning opportunities for all young people, including post-school provision. It also echoes wider concerns raised by Elwood (2012) who has commented that many students in mainstream schools have been thwarted by the effects of multiple policy changes, and that recent policy agendas of education, jobs and rewards are 'fast becoming false promises' (p.510).

It is notable that there was generally strong support from the students in the four special centres for pedagogical approaches characterised by a practical emphasis. This is partly in line with the views expressed by Wolf (2011) who argues for an increased emphasis on practical and vocational skills within 14–19 education. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that one of the criticisms levelled at Wolf's report is that her recommendations might lead to a more segregated education system in which lower-achieving students are channelled into courses that offer practical skills with lower currency than academic awards, and this might limit young people's aspirations at too early an age (Fuller and Unwin 2011).

Looking ahead, the importance of listening to the voice of students with special educational needs and disabilities should be recognised in future research on the curriculum. As stated at the start of this article, in investigations involving student voice it can be tempting to select pupils who achieve successfully at school as there may be assumptions that such pupils are more prepared to volunteer and may be more communicative when expressing their opinions. But writing from an international perspective, Tangen (2009) proposes that the views of disabled students whose voices are seldom heard are very important too and can make a significant contribution to developing a better understanding of how equality, quality of school life and inclusion can be achieved. In England a major review of provision for students with special educational needs and disabilities is currently underway, and in a recent UK government report (DfE 2012) there is explicit recognition of the contribution and role of special schools. This report refers to the benefits accruing from the creation of clusters of special schools, further education colleges and independent specialist providers across England as it is proposed that these are well-placed to challenge low expectations, improve teaching and learning and enhance planning for employment and independent living for young people with special educational needs and disabilities. In terms of future debates about the curriculum, it is essential that the voices of students attending special schools are

included. Hodgson and Spours (2011) point out that in the UK, 14–19 education is currently characterised by considerable policy flux – it will be important during this period of uncertainty and change that the contribution of special schools continues to be recognised and that the curriculum needs of children and young people attending such centres are not overlooked. It will be important too that as Elwood (this issue) argues where there is regard for 'student voice' this will need to be authentic (not tokenistic) and should relate to issues of core significance such as assessment, qualifications and examinations.

Notes on contributor

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