This is a repository copy of *Researching Children's Experiences in a Global Pandemic*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/208351/

Article:

Fox, Laura (2020) Researching Children's Experiences in a Global Pandemic. Hillary Place Papers (6).

https://doi.org/10.48785/100/246

Researching Children's Experiences in a Global Pandemic

Laura Fox, Department of Education, University of York

Abstract

Researching children's voices and experiences can be a difficult task to navigate, even in the absence of a global pandemic. This can be even more challenging when studying children with special educational needs and disabilities, including language and communication needs. With researchers having limited access to schools, and face-to-face data collection methods being unviable during the pandemic, novel and remote ways of collecting data have become necessary. In this paper I will reflect on the challenges I faced when designing data collection methods for my PhD study exploring how children with special educational needs and disabilities experience friendships, and how those experiences differ between mainstream and special education schools. The challenges faced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, including redesigning the study to accommodate lack of school availability, will be discussed, along with the way in which technology can be used to assist in data collection during a pandemic. I discuss the benefits and possible challenges of one of my major changes, a switch to using parents as interviewers. The paper will aim to provide an insight into alternative data collection methods and how this global crisis may have benefited data collection from hard-to-reach samples.

Introduction

My PhD aims to investigate how children with special educational needs and disabilities (SENDs), specifically those with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) or Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), experience friendships. It also aims to examine whether these experiences differ between children in UK mainstream and specialised educational settings. In order to explore the individual experiences of children with SENDs, I wanted to pay close attention to enabling children to have a voice and ensure that they were asked how they felt about their friendships, as opposed to using observations or parent and teacher reports. This paper discusses my experiences of designing a PhD study during a global health pandemic, and the creative methods adopted in a hope to gain understanding of children's experiences via remote data collection methods.

Background

Friendships can be described as social relationships between two individuals (Bukowski et al., 1996) and they can play an important protective role as children navigate their social worlds (Bollmer et al., 2005). Mutual friendships have been found to be a source of social support (Brendgen and Poulin, 2018), and high-quality mutual friendships have been found to act as a protective factor against bullying in typically developing children (Bossaert et al., 2015; Vaquera and Kao, 2008).

Unfortunately, there is growing evidence that children with SENDs have, on average, significantly fewer mutual friendships than their peers without SENDs, and having a diagnosed SEND can not only make it difficult to make friends, but to maintain them (Schwab, 2015). Children with SENDs make up 15.5% of the school population in England and 3.3% of all school pupils in schools in England have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) (*Special educational needs in England, Academic Year 2019/20.*, 2020), therefore it is important that we understand how these children experience friendships if we hope to provide suitable support to them.

Children in England with an EHCP have the option to attend either a mainstream or specialised educational setting. It could be suggested that school type may influence the number and/or quality of friendships an individual has, and studies have shown that children tend to show preference towards those who are similar to themselves: that is that typically developing (TD) children often chose to make

friends with other TD peers, and children with SENDs show a tendency to favour other children with similar needs (Bateman and Church, 2008; Hoffmann et al., 2020). This could have implications for SEND students, especially those attending mainstream education, as they may find themselves in an environment that is predominantly occupied with TD peers, resulting in fewer similar children to make friends with.

Although previous literature has highlighted that children with SENDs have increased difficulties making and maintaining good quality, reciprocal peer relationships, very little is known about how these children actually feel about their friendships, or lack of them. Children's rights to be considered as 'persons' are increasingly recognised, and the prominence of children's rights and social studies of children has challenged conventional thinking (Nations, 2006). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that all children capable of forming their own opinion should be provided with the opportunity to express those views (Unicef, 1989), which has resulted in an increase in qualitative studies which aim to give children a chance to have their voice heard. However, children's voices are not always truly heard, especially in the context of SEND research (Tangen, 2008).

Whilst qualitative methods are becoming more popular in childhood studies, the method is not as common when researching children with SENDs. Qualitative data collection methods often rely on oral language via interviews or focus groups, something which may not be suitable for participants who have lower levels of language proficiency or difficulties with attention. This reliance on oral language during data collection may act as a barrier when using qualitative data collection methods with SEND children.

Though additional barriers are present when using qualitative methods with children with SENDs, that is not to say there are no successful qualitative research studies in this area. Data collection techniques that focus on non-verbal tasks such as drawing, scrapbooking (where individuals can use craft materials to document their experiences or memories) or taking photographs, have been successfully used in research with children who have Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), and have been effectively used as prompts to facilitate discussions in semi structured interviews (Hambly, 2018; Lyons, 2014; Merrick and Roulstone, 2011). Building on ideas from successful studies, I wanted to ensure that my data collection methods enabled children to express their opinions in an accessible way, and in a way that they felt comfortable with, in order to gain an insight into their individual experiences.

The Impact of COVID-19

In March 2020, residents of the UK were required to stay at home and observe physical social distancing rules as a consequence of the COVID-19 health pandemic, changing the way in which we work, teach, learn, and socialise. For many doctoral researchers, it has not only impacted where and how we work, but has halted data collection and forced many to move to remote methods of data collection (Lambrechts and Smith, 2020). Sadly, my research was no exception and a year and a half into my PhD I found myself redesigning my project.

Initially I had hoped to gain access to English primary schools in which I could carry out in-depth, in-person semi-structured interviews with children. Children were to be provided with scrapbooks ahead of the visit to the school, which would be used as a springboard for discussion points in the interviews, and a variety of craft items were to be available to ensure that the children had the opportunity to play and feel comfortable. Children would have the opportunity to go over their responses to ensure that they had been correctly interpreted and child data would be triangulated with teacher and parent questionnaires.

However, it became clear that it was unlikely that schools would be accepting external visitors and that data collection would need to be adapted to take this into consideration. It was hoped that as opposed to me visiting the school, a teaching assistant could facilitate the interview, with myself calling in via video call. Unfortunately, this would require a lot of time and resources from the school, something

which was not in abundance during a global health crisis. It was also evident that schools were closing and even those children with EHCPs, who were entitled to a place, were often being taught at home or engaging with virtual classes, further impacting on my ability to collect data via schools.

Remote Data Collection

The move to home-schooling, and news that face-to-face research would not be accessible for research students, resulted in my study being redesigned so that data collection could be done remotely. To facilitate this, a pack would be sent home containing activities that could be completed by the child independently. Initially, the scrapbook was going to be used as a prompt only. Children would be invited to complete some brief activities that related to the study's research questions. These activities would then be used as a springboard in interviews, but the scrapbook data itself would not be analysed. An example of how key questions were linked to scrapbook activities and original interview questions are provided in the table below.

Key Question	Scrapbook Activity	Example Interview Q's
What do you think makes a good friend?	Draw a friend (page 8) – a stick figure outline will be provided with space for children to draw on features of what they think makes a good friend. Stickers will be provided with traits on, such as naughty, nice, kind, funny, for children to place onto the stick figure. There will be sections for children to explain what they like about this friend and what they would like to do with this friend. An alternative task using playdough will also be provided for those children who would rather 'make' a friend than engage in the drawing activity.	Discuss scrapbook activity. Why do you think x is important? Can you tell me about this friend? Do you think you are a good friend? Why?

With COVID-19 meaning that data collection would be remote, it seemed sensible to change the importance of this scrapbook data. The children in my study were likely to have lower levels of oral language proficiency so therefore they may express themselves more comfortably through arts-based methods, such as drawing or using crafts, so the decision was made to analyse the writing and drawing that children have provided to further understand their experiences.

By this point, the main study felt worlds away from what I had initially set off to do. It was a strange experience accepting that I would not be able to engage with children as I had initially hoped, and it was, to an extent, saddening when I began designing remote data collection methods. However, upon reflection, this shift may mean I am able to gather more honest data from the children involved as they would not have to engage with a stranger, they could engage with the study at home with their family. The move to remote data collection also meant that I would be able to recruit a sample of parents from across the UK, and not just in the local area which may increase the overall sample size of the study.

With all this in mind, a scrapbook was designed for children in Key Stage 2 (7-11 years) which allows them to express their experiences of friendships in a way that is hopefully enjoyable for them. Each activity is related to a research question and the activities can be completed via written words or

drawings, and in one activity playdough can be used to make 'a perfect friend'. The activities are designed with the hope that children can complete them on their own, for the most part, and are chunked into units so that it does not have to be completed in one go, something which may be important for children with attention difficulties or lower levels of language proficiency. Children are also reminded at the beginning of each activity that if they are not comfortable with the task or are not enjoying completing the book that they are able to stop at any point. The scrapbook is chunked into two sections: all about me, and all about my friends. The first section allows for children to write or draw about their favourite activities in order to establish a form of ownership over the scrapbook, and the latter aims to explore the experiences children have with their real-life friends, and what a perfect friend would look like from their perspective. Guidance on how to complete the scrapbook is provided to children via 'how to' pages at the beginning of each activity, and an information sheet was provided to parents to explain what each task was aiming to investigate and prompts for completing the task if children became stuck.

As stated previously, the importance of the scrapbook data gathered shifted as a result of COVID-19. The activities were, prior to the pandemic, going to be used solely as a springboard activity and not analyses. I decided that, given I may have shorter interviews that originally planned, that the drawings and writing children provided in their scrapbook would be analysed along with interview transcripts to gain a deeper understanding of the children's experiences. The focus of my study had also become much more honed in on the experiences of the children, and therefore my overall analysis moved away from reflexive thematic analysis to interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore each individuals experiences in detail.

Technology

Once the scrapbook was designed, I faced the difficulty of remote interviews. I wanted to ensure that children were able to talk about their scrapbook and their friendships as I believe this is important in accurately capturing their experiences. When making adjustments to my data collection to accommodate COVID-19, I had originally planned to carry out interviews myself via video call, with parents asked to send in photographs of the scrapbooks ahead of time so that the activities could be discussed with the children. Though this seemed like a good alternative to in person interviews I was aware that children, especially primary aged children with SENDs, may not be eager to engage with a stranger via a video call and may also be tired of online learning due to the shift to home schooling. Video calls would also make it difficult to build a rapport with the child and there was a risk that the power balance between researcher and child may become even more prominent.

Although COVID-19 has brought many challenges, it has encouraged or required people to rely more heavily on technology. Parents are now more aware of video calls and online teaching, and services such as speech language therapists have taken to remote assessments and therapy sessions. This uptake of technology could be seen as positive to those involved in researching harder to access participants or those that wish to observe children in a familiar setting, without their presence impacting on the child's behaviour. With this in mind, I decided that parents would be asked to interview their children about the tasks, following an interview script, and to record this conversation for the researcher via video. I was aware anecdotally that some child development professionals had taken this approach during the pandemic, with good success. In my study, parents are asked to discuss each section of the scrapbook with their child, and to encourage them to explain why they have chosen certain friends or activities to ensure that what the child has intended to say has been accurately captured. The video recording, along with scrapbook data, will be analysed to explore the children's lived experience and understanding of friendships. Parents are provided with an information sheet on how to complete the interviews, a script to follow and instructions on how to securely upload the video data via a drop box service. An example of the interview script for a task is shown below.

All about my friend:

This bit was all about a real-life friend. Can you tell me about who they are?

Can you remember where you met them?

Can you tell me about your favourite memory with this friend?

What makes this memory special?

What is your favourite thing to do with your friend?

Can you tell me why you like doing that with your friend?

It is hoped that some positives may come from this switch to remote data collection. Remote data collection methods may be more convenient for children and parents. Not only does it allow for the interviews to be carried out at a convenient time for the participants, as they do not need to arrange a time with the researcher, but it also removes the distraction of the researcher being in the child's home or school and removes the pressure of meeting a new person. This will hopefully allow for more naturalistic data and a nicer experience for all involved, especially those children who may find talking to a stranger stressful. There is no need for travel with remote data collection, reducing costs and allowing access to a wider range of participants that would have previously been restricted. Furthermore, it requires very little technology and can be done via a smartphone or tablet, with parents transferring the video file to a secure drop box programme, making the research accessible to most families.

There are, as with any study, some limitations. Firstly, there is a risk that those who are less comfortable using technology may be deterred from participating, though hopefully the current climate may mean that more people are open to using technology. There is also a chance that members of society that are not fortunate enough to have access to such devices or stable internet at home may be excluded. Finally, there are limitations to using parents as interviewers. Children may feel much more comfortable expressing their thoughts and opinions to a parent compared to a researcher but there is a chance that they will not be comfortable discussing sensitive topics with them, or even a topic as personal as friendships. Parents are also not trained interviewers, and therefore may not deviate from the semi-structured interview script to explore topics that are linked to research questions as often as researchers may do in face-to-face interviews.

Summary

Exploring the experiences of friendships in children with SENDs can be a difficult task even in the absence of a global pandemic. It requires novel data collection methods that take into consideration the wide spectrum of abilities that participants may have. Combining written accounts with drawings and (remotely conducted) interview data may be one way of allowing researchers to explore these experiences in more detail.

Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it many challenges, the experiences of designing a PhD amidst a global health pandemic have been rewarding. It has forced me to think outside of the

box with regards to data collection methods and has highlighted the power of using technology to gather data remotely, possibly improving our ability to reach participants that we could not reach in the past and providing a more convenient way of gathering data going forward.

Redesigning my study has also helped me to immerse myself in designing a qualitative study containing visual data which I may have otherwise overlooked. It has brought me much closer to some of my colleagues who have helped me with countless drafts of scrapbooks and interview schedules, and it has proven the resilience and drive that we, as postgraduate researchers, have to keep moving forward with our research, even when normal avenues are closed to us.

The struggles we have faced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic have been extremely difficult and are still ongoing and I believe that this challenging situation will continue to impact on the way in which we carry out research for many years to come, allowing us to embrace positive elements of remote data collection. I hope that the strengths and skills I have gained as a result of these difficult times will encourage me to think creatively about how I design my research going forward to ensure that the voices of those who need to be heard, are heard.

References

Bateman, A., & Church, A. (2008). Prosocial behavior in preschool: The state of play. *Educational and Child Psychology,* **25**(2), pp.19-28.

Bollmer, J. M., Milich, R., Harris, M. J., and Maras, M. A. (2005). A friend in need: The role of friendship quality as a protective factor in peer victimization and bullying. *Journal of interpersonal violence,* **20**(6), pp.701-712.

Bossaert, G., Colpin, H., Pijl, S. J., and Petry, K. (2015). Quality of reciprocated friendships of students with special educational needs in mainstream seventh grade. *Exceptionality,* **23**(1), pp.54-72.

Brendgen, M., and Poulin, F. (2018). Continued bullying victimization from childhood to young adulthood: A longitudinal study of mediating and protective factors. *Journal of abnormal child psychology,* **46**(1), pp.27-39.

Bukowski, W. M., Pizzamiglio, M. T., Newcomb, A. F., and Hoza, B. (1996). Popularity as an affordance for friendship: The link between group and dyadic experience. *Social Development,* **5**(2), pp.189-202.

Hambly, H. (2018). A relational understanding of language impairment: children's experiences in the context of their social worlds. In Runswick-Cole, K., Curran, T. and Liddiard, K. eds*. The Palgrave handbook of disabled children's childhood studies.* London: Palgrave Macmillan*,* pp.409-423

Hoffmann, L., Wilbert, J., Lehofer, M., and Schwab, S. (2020). Are we good friends?–Friendship preferences and the quantity and quality of mutual friendships. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, pp.1-15.

Lambrechts, A., and Smith, K. (2020). *Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis on Doctoral Researchers in the UK*.

Lyons, R. (2014). *Identity and meaning-making in children with primary speech/language impairments*

Merrick, R., and Roulstone, S. (2011). Children's views of communication and speech-language pathology. *International journal of speech-language pathology,* **13(**4), pp.281-290.

Nations, U. (2006). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol.*

Schwab, S. (2015). Social dimensions of inclusion in education of 4th and 7th grade pupils in inclusive and regular classes: Outcomes from Austria. *Research in Developmental Disabilities,* **43**, pp.72-79.

Special educational needs in England, Academic Year 2019/20. (2020). Retrieved 19/11/2020 from https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england

Tangen, R. (2008). Listening to children's voices in educational research: some theoretical and methodological problems. *European Journal of Special Needs Education,* **23**(2), pp.157-166.

Unicef. (1989). Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Vaquera, E., and Kao, G. (2008). Do you like me as much as I like you? Friendship reciprocity and its effects on school outcomes among adolescents. *Social science research,* **37**(1), pp.55-72.

Author's email: Laura.fox@york.ac.uk