

Originally published in *Special Children* as:-

Grove, N & Chalmers, S. (2014) Come on feel the noise! Or, who will stack the chairs?: a year in the life of a special school council. *Special Children*, 217 , 18-19.

Since the magazine closed in 2018, this article is no longer available. It is slightly amended for this website.

Updated information

The article is based on work carried out during a funded Storysharing project at Three Ways School from 20011-2014, and reflects what was happening at the time.

The article was written together with students K C, LF, and K H, pupils on the school council and Mrs. S, teaching assistant,.

Although the students wanted their full names included in the original article, it has obviously not been possible to contact them for consent to publication in this web version; they are therefore anonymised here.

Introduction

The current curriculum puts more emphasis on writing fictional stories than recounting personal experiences. Perhaps this stems from the assumption that children can do this without being taught. However, that is not always the case for children with communication difficulties.

Sharing what happens to you in the form of a story is a key skill we teach pupils at Three Ways, a special school near Bath for 170 students aged five to 19. In the process, they have learned that storytelling creates empathy.

This in turn can help them to make better decisions, as they discovered in the school council.

The school council

Run by the secondary school students, the school council is coordinated by teacher Stacey Chalmers and classroom assistant Mrs. S. One of the students describes how it works.

‘One or two people from each class come together to discuss things we want to happen, like a new playground or making the school more fun. This year we talked about, and had, a prom for the leavers, the first ever. There were lots of people looking lovely and having a wonderful time. In the school council you’ve got to think about other people too, not just yourself.’

Too much noise

This year the same big item came up in every meeting – what to do about the noisy dining hall. We had been exploring the Healthy Schools agenda, and the school council had been asked for ideas to improve the eating area. These are Dr Grove’s notes from the first meeting in the autumn term.

‘The most interesting discussion concerned students who find noise in the dining hall distracting, an issue brought forward on behalf of students with cerebral palsy who go into spasm when there is a loud sound. Stacking chairs before the end of the meal was a particular issue.

‘Miss Chalmers mooted that this would be easy to fix: every week a different class could stay behind to do this after everyone had finished eating. However, one of the older students said this would cut into their playtime. Miss Chalmers responded, “We are talking about people feeling comfortable.” As she spoke, two students shook their heads and in the event only two of the 18 members voted in favour. The issue is going back for discussion by classes.’

The meaning of democracy

Stacking chairs may appear a minor issue, but it gets to the heart of what we mean by citizenship – do we give up things that we want in order to benefit other people? As classes prepared for the next council meeting, they held some good discussions and found innovative ways of presenting the problem.

Miss Chalmers produced PowerPoints with photos illustrating both the topic (stacking chairs) and two possible solutions – a rota system or volunteers. All classes reported this was helpful. One class made a film of the dining room in action, highlighting a number of other issues such as queuing and the difficulty people in wheelchairs faced when collecting cutlery and negotiating access. The film was powerful and everyone enjoyed it. Teachers banged chairs together to illustrate the problem as well as using symbols and photographs.

Giving students more insight

To help convey the scale of the problem, we invited a young man who is affected by the noise to come to the council and tell his story. Mark communicates non-verbally by smiling and using his voice. He also has a BIGmack communication aid with a head switch (see *Tried and tested, Special Children* 216).

Using the Storysharing® strategies (see box), he was supported by Dr Grove and his class representative, who is herself deaf, to describe what happens when chairs are stacked behind him – he jumps, and then his tummy clenches up, and it hurts him later on. He can’t enjoy his food properly.

This made a big impact, as one council member recalls. ‘If Mark has food in his mouth, he might choke. When he jumps, he doesn't digest it properly. I felt really bad for him. Waiting for people to finish means we are safeguarding his health.’

Staff also remember the story vividly. Mrs S. admitted she had been unaware of the problem and Miss Chalmers said it was a learning experience for her. ‘It made it real to have someone telling you how he felt,’ she explained.

Democracy in action

The discussions that followed involved hard choices for the students. They voted for a rota, which was duly implemented, although it threw up a few problems, for example, when there were not enough able-bodied students present to carry out the task effectively.

KH was one of those who had originally rejected a rota, but when he saw how important it was, he voted in favour and represented his class effectively at the council. Meanwhile, the representatives of the class who were reluctant to give up their free time abstained. When they realised they had to take part in the rota anyway, the importance of a participatory democracy really came home.

As Miss Chalmers and Mrs S put it, ‘Once the minutes arrived, the class representatives realised they had messed up because the whole class was affected.’

For their part, the students concluded, ‘It’s not fair not to vote. Even if it affects one person, it’s bad enough. Their class didn’t have a say. If any people said no, it wouldn’t be fair for the other people who don’t like the chairs being stacked loudly.’

Finding a solution

The discussions continued over five meetings until there was a resolution – a sixth form class agreed to come late for lunch and stack the chairs afterwards in return for a special party in the summer. This had the added advantage of reducing the amount of time they had to queue and relieved the pressure on the canteen.

In the second dining hall, which two classes share, pupils decided they would continue to arrive together, but stay chatting at their table until everyone had finished eating. This sounds really simple, but it was a big change for individuals used to leaving as soon as their meal was over. Better still, the pupils had worked it out for themselves.

High level of awareness

The student council negotiations were accompanied by a lot of discussion back in class. Dr Grove's recorded observations show a high level of awareness of the needs of others, proving how well the representatives did their job of reporting back.

In conclusion, we feel this year has seen students wrestling with an important problem that has led to a great deal of learning about others and about how democracy works. We have also seen how important it is to have stories of real experiences to feed into the process of decision-making – whether through film, personal reporting or personal storytelling.

Help children to tell their own stories

It is important to prioritise oral/face-to-face storytelling.

- Make space to tell personal stories. For example, on Friday afternoons, take time to remember all the funny, scary, exciting, sad, happy, weird things that have happened to children in the week.
- Help children understand the difference between stories and news. In news time, the emphasis is on facts and getting these across quickly and efficiently. Sharing anecdotes is about crafting a story from their experiences that will entertain, shock, surprise and engage their listeners. Feelings are what count, and sometimes they may need to tweak the facts to make the story more interesting.
- Try not to ask too many questions – this turns a story into an interview and pupils may end up giving you one-word answers. Instead, prompt them to say as much as they can by echoing them, starting a sentence for them, and providing links such as 'and then?' If you know the basic outline, you can help by making the spaces for them to join in.
- Provide resources to help the storytellers – simple communication aids, props, photos or pictures (in moderation, otherwise pupils will end up just naming the pictures not narrating). While iPads can be helpful, keep the focus on the face-to-face experience, which develops empathy and engagement.
- Teach active listening to the audience. This means echoing words and gestures, and reacting with comments and facial expressions to demonstrate interest and engagement.
- Repeat the best stories with new listeners to give pupils the chance to hone their narrative skills.

Notes 2022

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<https://www.routledge.com/The-Big-Book-of-Storysharing-A-Handbook-for-Personal-Storytelling-with/Grove/p/book/9781909301405>

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