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**Exploring the touch encounters of individuals with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities (PMLD) at school: comparing in-person with video observations.**

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**Introduction**

People with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD) have a profound intellectual disability often combined with physical and sensory impairments and complex medical conditions. They are likely to be touched as part of the care they require. Touch may also be an important way they interact with people and the world.

Because people with PMLD often do not speak, sign or use symbols researchers cannot find out about their lives by asking them questions. Therefore, little is known about the touches that people with PMLD encounter.

A teacher and researcher wanted to find out about touches two of her pupils with PMLD encounter. She observed them and used a video camera worn by the pupils.

**Researching**

The pupils were Archie, aged 14, and Oliver aged 16. Both have vision impairment. Archie walks with support and wore the video camera on a chest harness. Oliver uses a wheelchair, and the camera was attached



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to his chair facing him. The teacher-researcher shadowed them each for a morning at school whilst they were wearing the camera.

The pupils' families gave permission for them to be involved in the research. The teacher-researcher and classroom staff also looked for pupils not liking or being upset by being part of the research. Archie and Oliver seemed comfortable wearing the cameras and with their teacher watching them.

Whilst in the classroom the teacher-researcher wrote information about the touches Archie and Oliver encountered while the video was recording. She used a list of different types of touches which she and other researchers had used before. She wrote notes on paper and used a watch to roughly time the length of touches. The notes were typed up the same day by the teacher-researcher.

The video recorded about an hour of footage for each pupil. After about a month the teacher-researcher watched the video footage and wrote notes about the touches using the same list of touches. The computer software used to play the videos had a clock so the length of touches could be accurately timed.

### **Findings**

The information from when the teacher-researcher was in the classroom is similar to her observations from the video recordings. The video recordings were watched multiple times and slowed down so might have provided more accurate information.

Both pupils were touched for several reasons, mostly to help them (e.g. to stand up or to wash their hands). Touch was also used to inform (e.g. where an item was). Staff touched to be kind and for other reasons. At times pupils were touched in multiple ways (e.g. personalising a Story Massage in a way the pupil preferred).

Both pupils were touched every 2 minutes or more often. This is similar to the encounters of a different pupil in a research project 17 years earlier.



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When watching Archie's video recordings the teacher-researcher noticed that staff used touch to encourage him to do things he did not want to do. This included where to walk and to put his cup down. Making Archie do things might not be good for him because it might cause learned helplessness (i.e. this is when someone stops trying to do things they want to do and can do).

When watching Oliver's video recording it was noticed that sometimes staff sat close to Oliver, so their arms touched. This touch helped Oliver know someone was there to communicate with.

### **Considerations**

The teacher-researcher was surprised about what she understood about the touches from watching the video recordings. She believes she was closer to understanding the perspectives of her pupils about being touched.

Because the teacher-researcher learnt things about touch in her classroom from the video recordings, she suggests other teachers might find out new things about their classroom if they did a project with pupils wearing video cameras. Other researchers might be able to use video cameras worn by people with PMLD to find out more about their life experiences.

This was a very small study, with only 2 pupils for a short time. The authors expect that touching might be different in other classrooms with different people. People might be interested in Archie's and Oliver's touch encounters as very little is known about this topic.

The authors recommend that more people consider the quality of the touches people with PMLD encounter. For example, someone might be supported to wash their hands in a quick efficient way or a personalised way.

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possible. The study was part of the teacher-researcher's educational doctorate at The University of Birmingham in the UK.