

**Understanding marginalisation through dialogue: a strategy for promoting the  
inclusion of all students in schools**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines how marginalisation of students in schools can be understood and addressed. Usually the term marginalisation is associated with existing categories, which mostly relate to policy formulations, and shape teachers' expectations of these groups as well as their practices. Using examples from the author's research, it is argued that a focus on the views of students can facilitate an understanding of marginalisation, as a broader concept that might be experienced by any student in school. In addition, the paper proposes an alternative approach, one that involves dialogue with students in order to challenge thinking that associates marginalisation with existing categories. Illustrative examples are used to demonstrate how such thinking can ensure the development of more inclusive thinking and practices that take account of all students.

**Keywords:** marginalisation, students' voices, dialogue, schools, inclusive education

**Introduction**

The concept of marginalisation has been widely used in psychology and sociology in the past (e.g. Antonovsky 1957; Dickie-Clark 1966; Park 1928; Stonequist 1937). Whilst the term is used in education, it is rarely defined and is usually associated with certain groups of students, such as migrants, those living in poverty, disabled people, people from ethnic minorities, etc.

UNESCO's Education for All Global Monitoring Report (2010) - *Reaching the Marginalized*, argues that defining marginalisation is difficult, but describes it using two dimensions: quantitative deprivation, as measured by years in school or the level of education attained, and a qualitative dimension that focuses on the lower levels of educational achievement of those who are defined as marginalised. The UNDP (1996,1) offers an alternative formulation, defining marginalisation as "the state of being considered unimportant, undesirable, unworthy, insignificant and different resulting in inequity, unfairness, deprivation and enforced lack of access to mainstream power". Such a definition focuses on how others come to define certain individuals as being marginalised but does not highlight the individual's experience in this. In other words, it implies that others come to consider certain individuals as unworthy and unimportant, and this results in unfairness and lack of power. However, it is not clear whether the ones that come to be seen as unworthy and unimportant do indeed feel this way and, more importantly, whether they do feel that they have been treated unfairly.

The kinds of marginalisation that are the focus of this paper relate more to qualitative experiences of individuals and groups, and specifically the complex experiences of students in schools. More importantly, it explores how adopting this more subjective angle of viewing marginalisation may have an impact on teachers' thinking and practice.

### **The concept of marginalisation**

The term marginal, or more precisely 'marginal man', has been used in relation to issues of migration (e.g Park 1928; Stonequist 1937). Though the term is used widely in education it is under conceptualised (Messiou 2012; Mowat 2015). Where such efforts have been made, the focus is on those who have migrated either from one county to another, or within the same country (e.g. Kwong 2011). In such work, marginality is usually seen as related to inferiority in relation to the dominant group and, consequently, the creation of a marginal identity for those who are in this position.

For example, referring to adults, Park (1928), argued that one of the consequences of migration is that individuals strive to live in two diverse cultural groups and, as a result, an unstable character is produced - what he called the 'marginal man'. Stonequist (1937) expanded on this concept and highlighted the duality of the relationship of this marginality,

with the exclusion from the dominant society on the one hand and, on the other hand, the non-acceptance by the society where the ‘marginal man’ comes from.

Whereas these earlier conceptualisations of the term focused on the specific personality traits that individuals develop, as the theory evolved, more emphasis was placed on the sociological perspective of the marginal situation and how it specifically affected the structure and functioning of the groups. For example, Dickie-Clark (1966, 28) points out that “the very notion of ‘marginal’ suggests limits or boundaries of some kinds as well as the juxtaposition of entities”. Similarly, Becker’s (1973) work on deviance suggests that all social groups make rules and attempt, at some time and under some circumstances, to enforce them. According to Becker those who break the rules are regarded as ‘outsiders’, or, as I would argue, as those on the margins. Such conceptualisations, though, focus on the assumption that there is a distinction to be made by others, amongst those inside and outside the margins, without giving sufficient emphasis to the subjective experiences of individuals.

In all of the above examples marginalisation is associated with certain groups, such as migrants and those classed as deviants. Taking such an angle, relates to research that has shown that there are some students who need more attention than others, and have been marginalised in school contexts, such as those defined as having special educational needs, disabled students, those from ethnic minorities, and those who appear to be disadvantaged by their gender (e.g. Derrington and Kendall 2003; Francis and Skelton 2005; Oliver 1996). And as many would argue, such a focus and a recognition of difference is necessary, in order for provision to be made available to enable individuals and groups to participate in schools (Norwich 1993; Terzi 2005). This approach groups learners in terms of one group to which they are assumed to belong. However, we should keep in mind that within any group there might be students who, although seen as belonging to a specific group, they might not experience any difficulties, or might have little in common with others placed within the same category. At the same time, each student has multiple identities, such as their ethnic and gender identities, something that relates to the ideas of intersectionality and the need for an engagement with multiple voices (Choo and Ferree 2010; McCall 2005).

In schools, especially, this focus on certain groups could possibly mean that we neglect others that might experience marginalisation but do not fall in any predetermined group that has been seen as needing special attention (Messiou 2006; Messiou 2017). As Slee (2001, 121)

argues, “the conversation about inclusive schooling must itself be representative of a range of identities”. Moving away from a preoccupation with certain groups of people, therefore, I am mostly interested in the experience of marginalisation by any learner within schools and how this can be understood through dialogue between teachers and students.

As a result of their study of poverty and education, Unterhalter et al. (2012) suggest that a lack of critical language to think about marginalisation can lead to the use of a language of blame and distancing, and the continuation of stereotypical views. As they explain, the concept of marginalisation is often used to signal aspects of exclusion, but tends to be under-theorised. They further argue that an absence of dialogue about the concept may result in inappropriate action being taken. This paper will highlight how the use of dialogue in schools can enhance this process of understanding marginalisation and consequently lead to positive actions to facilitate inclusion.

Marginalisation has been associated with lower levels of emotional wellbeing, higher levels of mental distress and readiness to use aggression (Caserta et al. 2016; Issmer and Wagner 2015). This highlights the importance of paying attention to feelings of marginalisation in education in order to ensure that young people develop healthy and safe attitudes to life.

#### **Four ways of conceptualising marginalisation**

Adopting a subjective angle, by primarily focusing on students’ voices in schools, my earlier work had led me to conceptualise marginalisation in four ways (Messiou 2003, 2006, 2012), as follows:

1. When a child experiences some kind of marginalisation that is recognised by almost everybody, including himself/herself;
2. When a child feels that he/she is experiencing marginalisation whereas most of the others do not recognise this;
3. When a child is found in what appear to be marginalised situations but does not feel it, or does not view it as marginalisation; and
4. When a child is experiencing marginalisation but does not admit it.

Students who seemed to fit one of these conceptualisations did not necessarily belong in a predetermined group that received additional attention (such as migrant students or those defined as having special educational needs). This reminds us that marginalisation is a

complex and sometimes subtle concept that can vary between contexts and times. It also means that any student, regardless of their personal characteristics or backgrounds, can therefore experience forms of marginalisation.

It is important to stress that these conceptualisations are not seen as robust categories into which students can be allocated. Rather, they are ways of thinking about the fluid and complex nature of marginalisation in order to explore possible responses. For example, in the study where they emerged (Messiou, 2003), there were students who were migrants whose experiences did not appear to fit with any of the four conceptualisations. Similarly, there were students who did not fall in any category that led them to receive specific attention (such as special educational needs) but still were found to experience marginalisation. This reinforces the view that if thinking about students in terms of which group they belong to, teachers in schools might make assumptions about them and, in so doing, take certain actions. In addition, they might overlook other students who do not fall in any predefined category.

### **Different ways of thinking about students in schools**

The view that teachers tend to think about students in relation to the groups that they belong to, is highlighted through a study carried out with colleagues, where we saw teachers thinking about students in three different ways (Messiou and Ainscow 2015; Messiou et al. 2016):

1. Teachers **adopted existing categories** such as: age, gender, ethnicity, language status, socio-economic background, level of attendance, and special educational needs status. These categories were usually related to policy formulations. For example, in England, a number of policy documents focus on certain groups of students (e.g. Department for Education documents – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, English as an Additional Language etc.) and therefore, encourage teachers to see these students as being distinctive groups, sharing common characteristics. In addition, data from testing led some schools to group learners in terms of their levels of attainment and progress made.
2. Teachers also **created new categories**, based on their perceptions and interpretations of certain groups of learners. Often these related to assumptions about presumed capacity to learn, as expressed in phrases such as ‘high’, ‘middle’ and ‘low ability’. In one school, for example, teachers referred to a group of students as ‘Miss Averages’, a specific group of students that were seen to be “in the middle’. Staff in another school saw a group of

students transferred together from another school that had closed as being members of a discreet category.

3. A new perspective that moved beyond the first two, was where teachers started **rethinking categories** and, therefore, not relying on predetermined categories to make assumptions about students. This enabled them to focus on contextual barriers rather than focusing on individual students' characteristics.

As discussed elsewhere (Messiou et al. 2016, 57) “the first two ways of thinking relate to what Paine (1990, 3) refers to as individual and categorical orientations to difference, whereas the third way relates to what she calls a contextual orientation, where differences amongst individuals occur in patterns, yet these patterns are seen as connected to a social situation or embedded in a larger, dynamic context”. Similarly, such ways of thinking about difference relate to the ‘organisational paradigm’, suggested by Clark et al. (1995), which looks for features within a context that facilitates responses to diversity and can assist with the development of more inclusive schools.

Acknowledging the dangers of thinking about discreet groups of students, especially in relation to marginalisation, as illustrated above, I suggest that a much more useful approach is that of thinking about the notion of diversity. Miles and Ainscow (2011) argue that, even though diversity in education refers to self-evident differences between children and young people, understanding it is far from straightforward. As they suggest, diversity is socially constructed. Minow (1990, 22) highlights that ‘difference is a comparative term. It implies a reference. Different from whom?’. She also used the concept ‘dilemma of difference’, according to which groups of students are treated differently because of being seen as different (e.g. introduction of separate special programmes for learning the English language), or being treated the same (through their involvement in bilingual programmes). She argues that both ways of treating difference lead to the same result: affirming difference. She adds that this dilemma exists because of the assumption that “to be different is to be unequal or even deviant” (50) and that we must analyse further these unstated assumptions in order to resolve the dilemma of difference. The concept of dilemmas in education and schooling has been introduced earlier by Berlak and Berlak (1981). Specifically, they identified 16 distinct dilemmas which they organised in three broad sets: control, curriculum and societal. They also argued that the ways in which teachers deal with contradictions of

their everyday working lives is complex. Their analysis is based on a dialectical account of teacher action based on symbolic interactionism.

In addition, McDermott, Edgar and Scarloss (2011, 226) suggest that “Every category is subject to the interpretations of people in interaction with other people”. These views relate to symbolic interactionism and to my own argument about marginalisation, that, even though it may sometimes be about particular groups of learners, it is also a social construction that differs in each unique context and within the interactions between its members. In addition, these positions relate to the issue of labelling and the dangers associated with it, such as stigmatisation (Lauchlan and Boyle 2007). Or, as I have argued elsewhere (Messiou 2017, 153), categories and labels can be dangerous, “not least in that certain assumptions might be made about a defined group of learners that might not be true of all of its members”.

In this paper, adopting the ‘organisational paradigm’, I argue that one of the features within a school context that can facilitate responses to diversity is the views of students. More importantly, these views have the potential to lead to dialogues that support relevant actions for the creation of more inclusive schools. Therefore, the key questions that I explore are:

- How can teachers engage in dialogue with students in order to understand marginalisation in schools and responses to diversity?
- How can the process of dialogue between teachers and students facilitate changes in teachers’ thinking and practices?

Lodge (2005, 134) suggests that dialogue “is more than conversation, it is the building of shared narrative.’ It is, she argues, ‘about engagement with others through talk to arrive at a point one would not get to alone”. In addition, dialogue has been described as communicative interactions characterised by respect, concern, and reciprocity among participants (Burbules 1993; Ryan and Destefano 2001). At the same time, Wegerif (2011) makes a distinction between interactions and dialogue. He highlights how robots interact but their interactions remain in an external space. He argues that “when humans enter in dialogue there is a new space of meaning that opens up between them and includes them within it”(180). In addition, referring to Bakhtin’s work, Wegerif (2010, 25) defines dialogue as “shared enquiry in which answers give rise to further questions forming a continuous

chain". Adopting elements of the above definitions, in this paper, dialogue is defined as the various reciprocal interactions between participants, that lead to an authentic engagement with one another's views, that subsequently lead to the creation of new meanings and the creation of further questions.

In what follows, using examples from a number of studies that I have carried out over the years, I illustrate the power of dialogue in understanding marginalisation in schools that can lead to changes in thinking and practices. The focus in this paper is not the studies themselves. In other words, the article does not focus on reporting the methodologies used or their findings. Rather it uses examples from the studies as an illustration of the main arguments of the paper, especially to highlight how the use of dialogue can facilitate better understandings of marginalisation in schools. However, the conditions under which dialogues occurred and the way that the roles of participants differ for each example will be discussed.

### **Rethinking potentially marginalising practices**

This first study took place in a primary school in the North East of England and was a qualitative study, collaborative in nature. It aimed to understand how marginalisation is perceived by students and how it can be dealt with in schools. The first phase of the study involved an understanding of the context, whereas the second phase focused on an engagement with the views of students in one year 5 class. All students in the class took part in the study. The third phase involved the sharing of extracts from the data gathered from students, with the whole class including the teacher and teaching assistant of the class.

One area that was explored in the interviews was the use of displays in the school. Discussing this issue with each of the students in the class, it seemed that it could be seen as a marginalising practice by those students whose work was never going on display. Interestingly enough, when I discussed the issue of displays with the class teacher in advance, in her view, the children were not really noticing what was going on display in the school corridors. Interviewing the students suggested the opposite. For example, during an interview, one nine year old boy told me:

Interviewer: I've noticed that outside your classroom in the corridors there are some displays with people's work ...have you ever stopped and looked at those?

Luke: Yeah.



Interviewer: Is your work somewhere on display?

Luke: No.

Interviewer: Was it before?

Luke: No.

Interviewer: What do you think about that?

Luke: Not that sure but I think it's a bit mean to everyone 'cos erm what if someone erm has done good work and they don't get to go on it ...everyone should get a chance to go on it.

When I shared this extract with the whole class, in response to the question: 'What could be done differently so that the child does not feel that way?', children came up with a good idea: that of making a chart with everyone's names and keep a record of whose work is going on display. In this way, they argued, the school could ensure that everyone's work goes on display. In addition, one girl put up her hand and said:

'I would also like to say that it should not be just work that is nicely done that is put on display but also if you made the effort and have improved that should also be taken into account.'

This comment caused the teacher to react, saying that they already do this. This was also confirmed by the teaching assistant who was present during this session. The girl who offered this suggestion blushed and seemed to feel a bit uncomfortable. I reassured her that this was a very good idea, that definitely needs to be taken into account if they develop the chart they suggested, and that it was very good to hear from the adults that, whether someone's work has improved or not, is already taken into account.

After the session I had a discussion with the teacher and the teaching assistant. They both tried to convince me that they already take into account whether someone's work has improved or not, and that they had explained this to the children. I commented to them that I had no doubt that they do that and that they had explained that to the children. I also mentioned that the evidence from the interviews, and then the follow-up discussion with the children, had shown that they were either not fully aware of this or that they did not feel that this is truly implemented.

This example illustrates how the adults involved started thinking differently about their own practices through dialogue between them and the students, and with myself as researcher. At the same time, it illustrates how notions of marginalisation that could be interpreted by teachers as relating to certain groups of children could affect any child, regardless if they fell into any predetermined category. As we have seen, the issues that emerged did not relate only to any individual student, or a particular group of students, but were practices that could make any student feeling marginalised. More importantly, practitioners did not even think that students were paying attention to this issue before listening carefully to what the students were saying.

Dialogue between students, the teacher, the teaching assistant, and with the researcher, led to a reconceptualising of a common practice as a way of potentially marginalising students. Such practices can make some students feel left out, as we have seen in the example, as well as signaling certain meanings to children about their classmates. Even though such practices might seem trivial in the adults' eyes, children at that young age pay attention to such details, as illustrated in the example.

In this example, the participants were the researcher, the children themselves, a teacher and a teaching assistant, and dialogues occurred first as part of individual interviews with children and then through facilitated discussions within a whole class activity. Specifically, my role as the researcher was to facilitate dialogue between children and teachers. However, dialogues such as these could also emerge naturally within school settings. This example illustrates how teachers in schools can use such opportunities in order to understand how students perceive practices in schools and how they could be modified in order not to marginalise anyone.

### **Looking at individuals that belong in certain groups**

The second example comes from a secondary school, again in England, where teachers focused on responding to diversity through a closer look at existing data about students and an engagement with the views of students. The teachers involved decided to focus on white working class boys, since they believed that this group of students underperform – a belief that was based on test results. Specifically, as a senior member of staff said:

‘We’re very data rich in the school, we have a lot of information and we have some software which enables staff to really focus on different groups, we have a lot of different groups. For example, we have a Roma population in the school... but what we wanted to know is whether individual teachers – although, you know at senior level we’re looking at the data all the time ... Do individual teachers use that data to carefully inform the planning of their lessons?’

The school found that the teachers were indeed using the data that was related to certain groups, however, such data was sometimes leading to assumptions about certain students simply because they belonged in those groups. However, when they started engaging with the views of students through a range of methods, such as questionnaires, interviews and visual images, it soon became clear to them that, within this group, there was great variation, both in terms of students’ experiences as well as their performance. For example, there were some students that were doing really well but simply because they belonged in this group of white working class boys were seen as potentially at risk of marginalisation - a perception that they realised was wrong. As one teacher said:

‘Of course, we look at diversity – but really we haven’t been looking...really looking at individual groups but not looking at individual children within those groups.’

It seems therefore, that looking closely at students’ views through a range of methods, allowed teachers to move away from approaches where children are seen as sharing certain characteristics due to the fact that they belong in a certain group. The participants in this example - the teachers- by engaging with their students’ views, as expressed through a range of methods, embarked on dialogues between them that led them to reconsider their own perceptions about their students. Such an approach relates to what Starkey (2017) calls a humanistic dimension of student-centred learning where the focus is on knowing the students as individual humans.

### **Moving beyond dialogue into actions**

In another English secondary school, teachers worked collaboratively with other colleagues and students to design lessons and evaluate these as part of a project. The approach they used combined lesson study and an engagement with students’ voices (Messiou et al. 2016; Messiou and Ainscow 2015). The lesson study approach is a well-established teacher

professional development approach where teachers work together in groups to design a lesson together and then one teaches it whilst the others in the group observe the lesson to make modifications to the lesson before it is taught again by the second teacher whilst observed by the others. The process is repeated as many times as the number of teachers in the group. One group of three teachers in this school, did not only collaborate with their colleagues to design the lesson but also involved students in deciding how they would allocate group members in a drama activity, as well as what roles individual students should be asked to take. As a result, certain students were given roles that teachers would have never assigned to them, based on their perceptions about the students' abilities. For example, in a follow up conversation between the teachers, John, the teacher who taught the lesson, explained the impact on his thinking:

John: If I'd have done that in my group, I'd have had (student's name) as the scribe, because he doesn't speak very much in class. He's very much EAL (English as an Additional Language) and I'd have probably given him one of the less, more marginal tasks, but because I didn't give them roles, he was the Dad yeah!....He put on that deep accent 'Come here!' (in a deep voice) ...

Kate: He was brilliant.

John: I never expected that! He's so quiet but there you go, they surprise you don't they.

This example suggests that when the teacher made decisions based solely on the fact that this student was not native speaker, he would have assigned to him a different role other than the one chosen by students. In other words, the student would have not been given the chance to take such a role because of the teacher's assumptions. It seems that this student, and possibly others, missed opportunities simply because the teacher applied certain ways of thinking about their abilities in schools. As seen in the example, the process of dialogue between other colleagues and students themselves allowed, first of all, for transformation of practices and, then, through carefully looking at the effect that this had on students' participation, for changes in thinking on the part of the teachers. In other words, a more authentic form of dialogue between teachers and students, involving collaboration in designing and evaluating a lesson, led to changes of practices and thinking amongst teachers. This relates to what Alexander (2008) calls 'teaching as negotiation', which, he argues, "reflects the Deweyan idea that teachers and students jointly create knowledge and understanding rather than relate to one another as authoritative source of knowledge and as passive recipient" (101). And, to go back to Lodge's (2005) definition of dialogue, the teachers arrived at a point that they would not get to alone. At the same time, this is an

example of where student voice was not just present but “in which that presence also has power, authenticity, and validity” (Hall, 2017, 183).

All of this relates to what Keddie (2015) describes as a progressive approach to student voice: “...for students it can generate a deeper understanding and appreciation of teachers and teaching and of the learning process.” (228). So, this process of dialogue works in both ways: on the one hand, it allows teachers to have better understandings of their students and how they view their learning; and, on the other hand, it allows students to have better understandings of their teachers and the learning process. And this involves, respect, concern, and reciprocity among participants (Burbules 1993; Ryan and Destefano 2001).

Such moves lead to changes in roles and relationships amongst teachers and students, such that both groups now become learners. Pearce and Woods (2015), in suggesting an evaluative framework for student voice work, argue that one of the core elements of their framework is that of dialogue, since, as they argue, “voice work must be to establish relationships that are free from or that resist domination, otherwise teacher voices and the voices of some students will be heard over others” (13). In this sense, what I am arguing here is a more participatory approach, which requires an engagement with the views of all students in order to understand and consequently address marginalisation.

However, such approaches require what Cook-Sather (2002) has described as the twin challenges of authorizing student perspectives: that is a change in mindset, as well as changes in the structures in educational relationships and institutions. I argue that this change of mindset must relate to the ways that teachers view certain students because of the categories to which they are allocated in schools. For example, Wedin (2015) describes how teachers in schools in Sweden who employed deficit ways of thinking about immigrant students and those with low socioeconomic status, assigned to them intellectually undemanding tasks and allowed very little space for demonstrating their own initiative. As a result, she argues, low levels of student engagement, and as a consequence, a negative impact on their learning were evident.

Similarly, as the teacher in our third example admits, the same deficit thinking about a student classified as having English as an additional language, has possibly taken away from him opportunities for learning in the past simply because the teacher applied certain

assumptions about this individual student. However, when the teacher took into account suggestions made by his classmates, who viewed the boy in a different way, he was given a central role which meant that he was in a position to perform in an impressive way during the lesson.

Such ideas relate to those presented by Hart and her colleagues (2004), particularly their model of transformability, where teachers move away from seeing ability as a fixed notion, to a notion of ability without limits. In this way of thinking, patterns for transformation are flexible guided by three principles: trust, co-agency and what they refer to as ‘everybody’. My argument is that this radical shift in thinking can be facilitated through a process of dialogue. Teachers can move to the kinds of thinking where they see every student as likely to experience marginalisation in school on the one hand, whilst, on the other hand, moving away from thinking that belonging in a certain group means that marginalisation is experienced, if they engage in dialogues with students and other colleagues.

All of this connects to the ideas of Fielding (2006), who describes person-centred learning communities as being based on mutual trust, care, autonomy and respect. He argues that such communities “transform the mechanics of consultation and the interstices of power through which young voices are heard, dialogue enacted and action taken” (309). In a way, approaches like the ones described in this paper, can facilitate dialogue and, more importantly, action taken. In essence, I see such approaches as closely relating to the development of inclusive practices in schools. Seeing inclusive education as a never-ending process that focuses on the identification and removal of barriers to participation and learning (Ainscow 1999), the argument here is that through dialogues between students and teachers and other colleagues, the identification, and more importantly, ways to address such barriers becomes possible. As Thomas (2013, 486) argues, inclusive education should “examine the ways in which schools enable community and encourage students’ belief in themselves as members of such community.”. The approaches described in this paper reflect this position in the sense that they can facilitate the development of inclusion where all students can contribute to dialogue and feel valued members of the school community.

### **A final thought**

As seen in all three examples, the process of dialogue was instrumental in making teachers think in different ways. Fielding (2004) argues that it is hard to demonstrate that differences

of view necessarily lead to transformation. Whilst this is true, the argument in this paper is that, when authentic forms of dialogue take place, they can lead to transformation in thinking and practices, of the sort I have described. Moving away from deficit ways of viewing students, therefore, simply because they belong in a category, and, at the same time, neglecting others simply because they do not belong in any category that are deemed to be of concern, opens up possibilities for transformation and the creation of more inclusive schools. More work is needed in this respect to identify the ways in which teachers in their very busy environments can find the spaces for such dialogues to occur that will facilitate changes in their thinking and practices.

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