

**Engaging with the views of students to promote inclusion in education**

**Mel Ainscow\* and Kyriaki Messiou\*\***

**Abstract**

The argument developed in this paper is set within the context of an increasing global concern to promote inclusion in education. Drawing on the authors' research over many years, it argues that an engagement with the views of students can lead to changes in understandings and practices that help to facilitate the development of more inclusive approaches in schools. At the same time, these experiences show how such processes can lead to 'interruptions' in the work of those in schools in ways that may challenge the status quo and sometimes lead to negative reactions. It is argued, however, that, under appropriate organisational conditions, such approaches can lead to dialogue between students and teachers that stimulates actions to promote inclusion in education. The paper concludes by outlining how such conditions can be promoted, focusing in particular on issues related to cultures and leadership.

**Keywords:** change, cultures, dialogue, inclusive education, leadership, students' voices, schools.

\*University of Manchester, UK, [mel.ainscow@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:mel.ainscow@manchester.ac.uk)

\*\*University of Southampton, UK, [k.messiou@soton.ac.uk](mailto:k.messiou@soton.ac.uk)

As a result of recent international developments, the issue of inclusion in education is high on the agenda of policy makers and practitioners in many countries. Most significantly, the Education 2030 Framework for Action, recently adopted by the global education community, stresses the need to address all forms of exclusion and marginalization (UNESCO, 2017). In particular, it calls for efforts to enable education systems to serve all learners, with a particular focus on those who have traditionally been excluded from educational opportunities, such as students from the poorest households, ethnic and linguistic minorities, indigenous people, and persons with disabilities.

In this paper, we reflect on our own research over many years to argue that students themselves are often an overlooked resource for addressing this crucial global change agenda. This leads us to suggest that those students for whom existing arrangements act as barriers to their participation - regardless of them belonging to any of the above categories or not - may be hidden voices. Their views can, under certain conditions, encourage inclusion in education. This paper explores the implications of adopting such a perspective, focusing in particular on the challenges involved and how they can be overcome.

### **Promoting inclusion in education**

In some countries, such as many in Europe as well as the United States, inclusion in education is still thought of as an approach to serving children with disabilities within general education settings (Operti, Walker and Zhang, 2014). Internationally, however, it is increasingly seen more broadly as a reform that responds to diversity amongst all learners. The paper adopts this broader formulation. It presumes that the aim of inclusive school development is to eliminate exclusionary processes that are a consequence of attitudes and

responses to diversity in relation to race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and perceived abilities.

Based on similar thinking, recent guidance regarding ways of promoting inclusion and equity from UNESCO (2017) - the United Nations' specialised agency for education - argues that the central message is simple: 'every learner matters and matters equally'. The complexity arises, however, when we attempt to put this principle into practice within national contexts where there are competing views as to the priorities for educational policy. This is a particular challenge as far as inclusion is concerned, since progress is likely to require changes in thinking and practice at every level of an education system - from teachers in classrooms, through to school leaders, district level administrators and, of course, those responsible for national policy. Therefore, policies have to be well thought through, effectively implemented and monitored for impact.

In an earlier contribution to this journal, it was argued that this policy challenge points to a need for powerful 'levers for change' (Ainscow, 2005). According to Senge, (1989), 'levers' are actions that can be taken in order to change the behaviour of an organisation and those individuals within it. He goes on to argue that those who wish to encourage change within an organisation must be smart in determining where the high leverage lies.

There are many factors that have the potential to either facilitate or inhibit the promotion of more inclusive practices within education systems. However, Ainscow (2005) argues that two factors are superordinate to all others, particularly when they are closely linked. These are: first of all, clarity of definition; and, secondly, the use of evidence.

In terms of clarity of definition, Ainscow et al (2006) suggest that inclusion in education should involve the following features:

**A process of development.** Inclusion in education requires a continuous search to find better ways of responding to student diversity. It is about learning how to live with difference and learning how to learn from difference. In this way, differences come to be seen more positively as a stimulus for fostering learning among children and adults.

**Focusing on the identification and removal of barriers.** Here barriers may take different forms, some of which are to do with the way schools and other educational contexts are organised, the forms of teaching provided, and the ways in which children's progress is evaluated.

**A concern with the presence, participation and achievement of all learners.** Here 'presence' refers to where children are educated and how reliably and punctually they attend school; 'participation' relates to the quality of their experiences while they are present and therefore must incorporate the views of the learners themselves; and 'achievement' is about the outcomes of learning across the curriculum, not merely test or examination results.

**A particular emphasis on those learners who may be at risk of underachievement, marginalisation or exclusion.** This indicates the moral responsibility to ensure that those groups that are statistically more at risk are carefully monitored and that - where necessary - steps are taken to ensure their

presence, participation and achievement within the education system. At the same time is necessary to be vigilant in watching out for learners who may be overlooked.

Experiences in many parts of the world indicate that a well-orchestrated debate amongst stakeholders about these features can lead to a wider understanding of inclusion as a principle (Ainscow, 2016). Furthermore, such a debate - though by its nature slow - can have a leverage impact by fostering the conditions within which schools can be encouraged to move in a more inclusive direction. The debate should therefore involve all stakeholders within the local community, including families, political and religious leaders, and the media. We emphasise that, in our view, it must also involve the views of students.

The concern to identify powerful levers for change points to the importance of evidence. This is, in essence, a recognition that, within education systems, 'what gets measured gets done' (Ainscow, 2005). So, for example, education systems now collect far more statistical data than ever before in order to determine their effectiveness. Most recently this has led to new pressures, as those guiding national policies in many countries have become preoccupied with measuring school outcomes in terms of test scores and comparing their progress with that of other countries through systems such as PISA (i.e. Programme for International Student Assessment).

This trend is widely recognised as a double-edged sword precisely because it is such a potent lever for change. On the one hand, data are required in order to monitor the progress of individual learners, evaluate the impact of interventions, review the effectiveness of policies and processes, plan new initiatives, and so on. In these senses, data can, justifiably, be seen as the life-blood of continuous improvement. On the other hand, if effectiveness is evaluated on

the basis of narrow, even inappropriate, performance indicators, then the impact can be deeply damaging (O'Neill, 2013).

The challenge is, therefore, to harness the potential of evidence as a lever for change, while avoiding the potential problems involved. This suggests that great care needs to be exercised in deciding what evidence is collected and, indeed, how it is used. With this in mind, the starting point for making decisions about the evidence to collect should be with an agreed definition of purpose. In other words, we must focus on what we value, rather than is often the case, 'valuing what we can measure', acknowledging also that there are important aspects of school life that are difficult to measure.

In line with the suggestions made earlier, then, the evidence collected must be related to the 'presence, participation and achievement' of all learners, with an emphasis placed on those groups regarded to be 'at risk of underachievement, marginalisation or exclusion'. This, of course, entails dangers since it can create certain stereotypes about students falling in specific groups (Messiou, 2017). And, more importantly, it can deflect attention from wider contextual factors that create barriers to learning and participation (Ainscow, 2000; Tomlinson, 2012). At the same time, as noted above, it is important to be vigilant with regard to learners who may have been overlooked, simply because they do not belong in any group that has been identified as requiring special attention (Messiou, 2017).

### **Learning from difference**

With this formulation as a guide, our own research over many years suggests that there is a need for radical new thinking regarding how schools can be supported in developing their capacity for responding to learner diversity (e.g. Ainscow et al, 2006; Ainscow et al, 2012;

Ainscow et al, 2016; Messiou, 2002; 2006, 2012). Underpinning our work is the belief that differences can act as a catalyst for innovation in ways that have the potential to benefit all students, whatever their personal characteristics and home circumstances.

We are also committed to drawing on effective practices in responding to student differences that are usually there in schools. This means that the starting point for strengthening the capacity of a school to respond to learner diversity should be with the sharing of existing practices through collaboration amongst staff, leading on to what Hargreaves (2011) refers to as joint practice development. Our research shows that this can be stimulated through an engagement with the views of different stakeholders, bringing together the expertise of practitioners, the insights of students and families, and the knowledge of academic researchers in ways that challenge taken-for-granted assumptions, not least in respect to vulnerable groups of learners. This can also stimulate new thinking, and encourage experimentation with alternative ways of working.

The evidence needed to create this stimulation can take many forms and involves a variety of techniques. What is common is the way it creates ‘interruptions’ in the busy day of teachers that lead to the sharing of practices and the generation of new ways of working (Ainscow et al, 2006). In this sense, interruptions are seen as a legitimate and sustained challenge to the status quo, rather than as a temporary annoyance to traditional thinking.

Much of our own work involves us in collaborating with teams of staff and students within schools in order to learn more about how to make this work within current policy contexts. In these contexts, we have found that the use of evidence to study teaching within a school can help in fostering the development of practices that are more effective in reaching those seen

as ‘hard to reach’ learners. Particularly powerful techniques in this respect involve the use of mutual lesson observation, sometimes through video recordings, and evidence collected from students about teaching and learning arrangements within a school.

An effective approach for introducing these techniques is lesson study, a systematic procedure for the development of teaching that is well established in Japan and some other Asian countries (Lewis et al., 2006). The goal of lesson study is to improve the effectiveness of the experiences that teachers provide for all of their students. The focus is on a particular lesson or activity, which is then used as the basis for gathering evidence on the quality of experience that students receive. Planned by a small group of teachers, these are called research lessons and are used to examine the responsiveness of students to the planned activities. The group of teachers work together to design the lesson plan, which is then implemented by each teacher in turn. Observations and post-lesson conferences are arranged to facilitate the improvement of the research lesson between each trial. It should be noted here that the main focus is on the lesson and the responses of class members, not the teacher.

In using this approach, we have taken a further step forward by incorporating the views of students. Our research suggests that it is this factor, more than anything else, that makes the difference as far as responding to learner diversity is concerned (Messiou & Ainscow, 2015). In particular, it is this that brings a critical edge to the process that has the potential to challenge teachers to go beyond the sharing of existing practices in order to invent new possibilities for engaging students in their lessons. In other words, students’ views can add a distinctive perspective for developing changes in learning and teaching that go well beyond traditional views of effective practice. Where such changes take place, it is useful to think of them as the result of an interruption to continuing thinking and practice which brings about a



transformation from ‘single-loop’ to ‘double-loop’ learning (Argyris & Schon 1996); that is, from learning which enables practice to be improved incrementally, to learning which shifts the assumptions on which practice is based.

Elsewhere we have documented how, within a study which took place in secondary schools in three European countries, these processes sometimes led teachers to reconsider their ideas regarding learner diversity, particularly in respect to the ways in which differences are formulated and described (Messiou et al 2016). So, for example, one trio of teachers involved seven students, each from a different ethnic background, in decision making about how to assign working group members in a drama activity, and what roles individual students should be asked to take. In these ways, sitting with their students to plan the lesson, the teachers moved to a more authentic form of collaboration and an immediate way of acting upon what students were suggesting in terms of responding to differences. There was evidence, too, that these experiences made students feel more engaged and that teachers reconsidered their own assumptions about specific students.

Alongside the emphasis on engaging with student views, collaboration with other practitioners was a necessary factor in bringing about such changes in teachers’ thinking and practices. This aspect is, of course, an essential element of the lesson study approach. What was distinctive, however, was that teachers did not just collaborate with other teachers, but also with their students. We also concluded that if it is only one teacher listening to what the students say, they might choose to be very selective as to what they notice – even choosing to ignore certain areas that create too much of an interruption to their thinking. However, when more colleagues look at the evidence together this is more likely to affect the way they listen, and consequently how they make changes to their practices.

We have found that one of the challenges involved in using such approaches is that different students may offer varied or even contradictory views, thus making it difficult to know what actions will be most effective. For example, it was common across the schools in this particular study to hear some students saying they preferred working in groups. But, of course, there were others for which that was not their choice. The implication is that whilst engaging with the views of students can stimulate teachers to think about learner differences in new ways, it does not take away the need for them to make professional decisions regarding the best ways to format their lessons.

Other researchers have added to our thinking about all of this by arguing that engaging with the views of students in schools can be beneficial both to schools and for students themselves. For example, a series of studies by Mitra (2003; 2004) and Mitra and Serriere (2012) points to the growth of agency, belonging and competence for students. In addition, it has been argued that such approaches can promote stronger relationships between students and teachers (Fielding and Bragg, 2003; Fielding, 2004; Hope 2012). Meanwhile, Leat and Reid (2012) report that an engagement with student views in a secondary school as part of a curriculum development project had a positive effect on what was taught, by whom and how.

However, as we illustrate later in this paper, listening to students' views can also be disturbing. For example, there are accounts of students' views being seen to be too challenging, such that they were not shared with others within a school (e.g. Cunninghame et al, 2009; Kaplan, 2008). And, in other examples, students' views were simply undermined by selective use of what was said (Messiou and Hope, 2015; Wilson, 2000).

In what follows, then, we reflect on examples drawn from our research with schools over many years in order to throw more light on the nature of such challenges and the reactions they can create. This leads us to address the question: How can an engagement with the views of students lead to the transformation of understandings and practices in relation to learner diversity in schools? We also consider how the challenges involved can be overcome.

### **Experiencing surprises**

It has been argued that listening to students relates to six interconnected themes: changing views of childhood, human rights, democratic schools, citizenship education through participation, consumerism and a concern for school improvement (Lodge, 2005). We are adding to that list by suggesting it can be an important means of promoting inclusive developments. Such a view is endorsed by Barton (1997), who argues that inclusive education is about listening to unfamiliar voices, being open and empowering others. As we will show, this can sometimes lead to surprises, which can open up spaces within which new thinking may occur.

By way of example, we recall what happened in a primary school in a local authority district that had developed an 'Inclusion Standard', a review instrument for evaluating the progress of schools on 'their journey to becoming more inclusive' (Moore, Jackson, Fox, & Ainscow, 2004). The Standard starts by focusing directly on student outcomes, rather than on organisational processes as is often the case when carrying out school reviews. Consistent with the definition of inclusion referred to earlier, it was concerned with the presence, participation and achievements of all of the students within a school. An essential feature of the Standard was its use of the views of students to assess a school's progress in relation to this agenda.

To assist schools in carrying out a self-review, a number of techniques were outlined in a ‘Pupil Voice Toolkit’ that was associated with the Standard (Fox and Messiou, 2004). In using such activities, an evaluation of whether children perceive their school practices as being inclusive or not could be made, and, at the same time, their voices could be used in such a way so as to stimulate thinking about to become more inclusive.

Commenting on her school’s use of the Standard, the head teacher explained:

‘We felt our practice was already inclusive. We felt that the Inclusion Standard would help us synthesise what we were doing at the moment. So we thought, let’s look at what the Standard offers. We wanted it not to be a paper exercise but for it to affect our practice. It’s not about finding a box of evidence. You can sometimes take yourself for granted...’

Through the engagement with the Standard, the school set the following targets:

- To increase the number of pupils who feel that their ideas are taken into account and actioned on;
- To increase the number of pupils who feel safe at unstructured times during the school day; and
- To increase the number of supported pupils demonstrating social skills

What is very important here is the status of these targets. They emerged from a process of analysis and discussion that involved many people in the school, not least children. Indeed,

staff members felt that the various pupil voice activities they used, such as surveys, a pupil message box and focus group discussions, were particularly significant in helping them to identify the issues that needed to be addressed.

At the same time, these activities were seen to help promote a feeling of greater involvement amongst the children themselves. So, for example, talking to some of them it was clear that they were aware that the head teacher read and acted on the notes they put in the message box that had been introduced. Interestingly, one child said, “If it is something private the head will not talk about it in the assembly”. It struck us that this showed that sensitive issues were dealt with differently and that children knew about it.

The fact that the school continued using the message box idea in every classroom during the following year, as well as using other pupil voice strategies, indicated that teachers had seen the potential benefit of these activities. More importantly, they were seen to embed many of these approaches into their daily teaching in such a way that children felt that their views are listened to on a regular basis.

However, there were some ‘surprises’. In particular, attention was drawn to various rather subtle issues related to safety. For example, some children mentioned the noise in the dining room, and others described how they felt unsafe in the toilet areas, or when left isolated on the school field. One child made it known that he always avoided going into the classroom first in case he found himself there alone. In general, discussions in pupil focus groups pointed to the fact that lunchtimes were the most common times when pupils felt unsafe. For example, a teacher noted that some boys were intimidating others.

Actions were taken by staff to address these concerns. For example, some children had mentioned that they were afraid coming down the stairs and so they were given more assistance. In addition, arrangements were made to ensure that there were more adults around the toilet areas so that children would feel safer.

Interestingly, a staff survey led to a similar focus, highlighting twenty children who had poor social skills. These pupils were given opportunities to work with other children, under the supervision of learning support mentors, in order to help them develop their skills. Attention was also focused on a small group of children who were experiencing difficulties of various kinds during the lunch break. This led some of the teachers to scrutinise the findings from the pupil questionnaires and focus groups with the team of lunchtime supervisors. Together they planned new arrangements to reassure children regarding their safety. For example, monitoring systems were introduced so that children at risk of marginalisation during lunchtimes could be identified and supported. A 'quiet' area was designated for pupils experiencing social difficulties during the lunchtime, where they could take part in alternative play activities. In addition, pupil 'buddies' were introduced in order to support vulnerable children and to provide models of acceptable social behaviours. The aim was that these pupils would be supported in joining in activities on the main playground for increasing length of times, until they became fully integrated.

Overall, the outcomes indicated that there has been an increase in the number of children who felt safe in the school. As one of the children said, "I used not to feel so safe, but now I do. At lunch time there are lots of dinner ladies and there is always someone to talk to". Furthermore, some of the more vulnerable pupils benefited from the support arrangements

that were been introduced. In addition, overall pupil involvement in the school increased, in such a way that it benefited both staff and children themselves.

During focus group discussions, children explained how they felt they were listened to far more in school now. The school council, set up in response to the pupil survey data, seemed to be particularly valuable in this respect. Representatives from each class were elected to the council and a number of children who were seen to be at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement were included. One teacher explained that she was pleased that, in her class, two children who were rather shy had been elected. Another member of staff said that in her class the children seemed to look forward to their representatives on the council reporting back on what had been discussed.

In this school, then, it was evident that members of staff were willing to listen to and act upon what their children had to say. However, listening to students' views and accepting that what they say is worthy of attention is not always a straight-forward process. In order to illustrate some of the difficulties, we move on to contexts where teachers were less willing to listen.

### **Are we listening?**

In order to explore all of this, we return to the experiences one of us had when carrying out her PhD fieldwork in another primary school (Messiou, 2003). An ethnographic type of study, carried out over a period of five months, the aims were twofold: first, to bring to the surface children's views about how they experience marginalisation at school; and, second, to explore how children come to construct meanings about other children and, especially, those children who seem to be marginalised. There was also a consideration of the relationship between these meanings and the way children behave towards one another.

The study was in four phases. The first of these was about familiarisation with the setting and participants, and the second phase involved the identification of those children possibly experiencing marginalisation. During the third phase, there was a focus on those children that were identified as experiencing marginalisation, and, finally, in the last phase, an ‘intervention’ was carried out. In particular, in an effort to offer something back to the school for allowing the researcher to carry out the research in the school, and to inform the participants about some of the understandings gained through the study, some sessions were carried out in each classroom with students, and a presentation to teachers was made in a staff meeting. During this meeting extracts from the interviews with children were used, keeping the students’ anonymity at all times.

There was a mixture of reactions to the extracts from the interviews. Some of the teachers reacted in a rather negative way, asking about percentages of children who expressed some particular views, arguing that maybe very few expressed these ideas and therefore there was no reason to make generalisations and be concerned. It is worth noting here that we have sometimes experienced similar responses when student views were reported in other schools. Other teachers were more positive, of course, arguing that we should listen to what every child has to say.

The most interesting incident, however, was the way that one of the teachers reacted to a particular extract from an interview, which was related to the way students view children coming from other countries. The opinion expressed by one child in the extract was rather negative, if not racist. When the extract was read out the teacher commented, “This is definitely an influence coming from home. The school would never pass on ideas like this



one". What was most striking here, was that the teacher, herself, was the mother of the girl that was interviewed.

We will never know whether this particular teacher was aware of the fact that these were her daughter's words. No matter what the reality is, it is in itself interesting that this teacher, and some of her colleagues, appeared to deny responsibility from themselves, and from the school in general, for the construction of such meanings, instead of viewing them as a challenge that needed to be dealt with within their school. The issue here for us was not whether these ideas were coming from home or from school, but the fact that they existed among some students, and what could be done about this.

### **Experiencing turbulence**

According to Fielding (2004), an engagement with student views can lead to a transformation of practices but that this requires 'a rupture of the ordinary', involving changes in teachers' and students' roles. In addition, Cook-Sather (2002) refers to the twin challenges of authorising student perspectives: that is, a change in mindset, as well as changes in the structures in educational relationships and institutions. This reminds that such approaches can indeed be challenging and may even lead to moments of turbulence as those involved are confronted with views that are different to their own.

To illustrate the form that this can take, we revisit an experience in a secondary school, where, with a colleague, one of us collaborated with a small group of sixteen-year old students to record their views of the school (Ainscow & Kaplan, 2005). The account was rather encouraging, not least in that it suggested that, even within a context of extensive external pressure to 'raise standards', schools can move towards more inclusive ways of

working. At the same time, the account illustrates the social complexity of such processes and the way factors external to a school can complicate the agenda.

With the agreement of the head teacher, the two researchers collaborated with the students to record their views of five years in the school, using what was called a 'photovoice approach'. It was hoped that the student perspectives would provide deeper insights into what happens in the school and that their views could be used to stimulate further developments amongst members of staff. Working in pairs the students took photographs around the school of areas they saw as welcoming and supportive, and areas that were less so. The pairs then produced posters based on their photographs. As they worked, the student conversations were recorded, and they were occasionally probed about their experiences and opinions by the researchers.

The students made many positive comments about the school and its inclusiveness, confirming impressions gained from staff. However, they also highlighted several things they felt made the school a 'less welcoming' place. For example, some students pointed out some inconsistencies in the school's application of its rules. There was, they argued, a sense that the best and worst students were exempt from certain rules, leaving those in the middle, sometimes feeling unfairly penalised. One student explained 'If you're a good student you get away with a lot more, but if you're a bad student you can't get away with nothing.' Another elaborated, 'but if you're really bad you can get away with things because the teachers can't be bothered to keep telling you.'

This concern with fairness was also apparent in terms of the use of the building. The students illustrated this by contrasting the staff room, which they understood to be a special place, only for teachers, to the students' toilets which they saw as being one of the few places for

students to 'hang out' during their free time. They understood this to be a somewhat overdramatic distinction, but used it to highlight the point. They expressed the desire for different sort of space for older students in the school, one student saying: 'We thought, if there's a staff room there should be a year 11 room...there is the dining room, but it's not one of the most relaxing places to sit down.'

Students also felt it was difficult to outlive a poor reputation in the school, even if the individuals changed their behaviour and academic performance. They acknowledged that the difficulty of changing image is a school wide problem and not just an issue between staff and students. For example, one commented: 'If you're the class clown everyone finds you the class clown. No matter what you do they try and push you to do it...to do stuff silly. While they do the work, you're doing stuff, annoying the teacher and they find it funny, but you know you're going to get done for it.'

Some of the students felt that there had been attempts at consultation in the school but were largely dismissive of instances of what they saw as involving a tokenistic process. For example, one said: 'They had a group of students design the new uniform. They called it 'keep it real' and they came up with all these ideas, but no matter what they did or what they wanted, it always had to go through the school and they changed it.'

Having spent some months collecting views of staff and students about the school's efforts to become more inclusive, the two researchers used their evidence to write an account of what had happened. This was then discussed at a meeting they had with the school's senior leadership team. Whilst there was a range of reactions to the information that was presented, some of which were contradictory, there was a general consensus that the students' views

were simply wrong. So, for example, comments from students about what they saw as the rather tokenistic approach to consultation that had taken place about a new school uniform were described as being untrue. Indeed, the senior team saw student involvement in decision making as a strength in the way they were running the school. Many of the group also dismissed the views of students about bullying and the tendency of some staff to stereotype some students.

Later, it struck the researchers that they had, unintentionally, chosen a bad time to share their findings with these teachers. They were, at that time, facing a particularly challenging set of circumstances related to a plan for reorganisation that would likely lead to the school being closed. It was, therefore, perhaps understandable that this particular form of interruption was not met with much enthusiasm, which reminds us that those working in schools are always having to take account of external pressures.

### **Reflecting on the process**

The examples we have described point to the power of listening to student views as a means of stimulating inclusive developments in schools. At the same time, they provide vivid illustrations of why none of this is straightforward. As we have seen, such approaches can involve periods of discomfort as people struggle to make sense of unfamiliar points of view. On some occasions, it can also lead to what appear to be denials, as adults find it difficult to digest views that seem to contradict their taken for granted assumptions about what happens in their school.

It is helpful to view our three accounts in relation to four types of student involvement suggested by Lodge (2005). These are, she suggests, to do with: quality control; students as

sources of information; compliance and control; and dialogue. In the two first types - quality control and students as source of information - the students are regarded as being passive. In the case of quality control, students are used for institutional gains, whereas students as sources of information are used for improvement purposes but without necessarily engaging with them. Compliance and control again serves institutional goals, however, at the same time, this takes into account students' rights to be involved in discussions about their school. Finally, in relation to dialogue, students are viewed as being more active participants. Commenting on this fourth perspective, Lodge argues, "It is more than conversation, it is the building of shared narrative. Dialogue is about engagement with others through talk to arrive at a point one would not get to alone" (p. 134). This last perspective is the one that we favour. In this paper, we wish to point to the potential of the dialogue approach, as well to throw light on the challenges involved when engaging with the views of students in schools

In the first of our three examples, students' voices were used within a framework of a review instrument that was adopted by the school on a voluntary basis. And yet, those involved did feel surprised with some of the views their students expressed. Whilst they said they did consider themselves to be members of an inclusive school and had been working towards this as a principle over many years, the staff found that the percentage of students who did not feel safe in school was a cause for concern.

It might be argued that the school initially engaged with student voice as part of the requirements of meeting the Standard, and therefore could be viewed as falling into one of Lodge's first three types of student involvement. However, we saw evidence of how those involved moved to a dialogue with their students in their effort to become more inclusive. In this context, members of staff seemed to be open to new ideas and new ways of thinking, and

not just committed to their own point of view, which is one of the characteristics of dialogue suggested by Lodge (2005).

In the second example, an external researcher, who became a participant observer in a school, gathered some views that were already there among their students but had not previously come to the surface. The form of denial that was evident in the school might be related to the fact that the investigation did not start from the concerns of the school. As a consequence, some staff members did not seem to consider it to be of crucial importance, or, indeed, of any relevance to what they were doing. More importantly, this denial might be due to the fact that adults actually felt the need to defend themselves and their efforts.

Interestingly enough, the teachers did not question whether what students were saying was the truth. Rather, they tried to explain where these beliefs were coming from, in such a way so as to distract responsibility from themselves. It should be noted, however, that not all of the teachers were dismissive of what was presented in the staff meeting. It could be argued that presenting teachers with the actual students' words led to what we have referred to as an 'interruption', although as far as we know it did not lead on to any changes in thinking or practice. Therefore, in this example, we see what Lodge (2005) describes as students as sources of information but without necessarily engaging with them.

Similarly, the experience in the third example, set in a secondary school, suggests that whilst an engagement with the views of students can create space for reviewing thinking and practice, it is not in itself a straightforward mechanism for the development of more inclusive practices. The space that is created may be filled according to conflicting agendas. In this

way, deeply held beliefs within a school may prevent the analysis and experimentation that is necessary in order to foster the development of more inclusive ways of working.

Such explanations remind us that educational difficulties can easily be pathologised as difficulties inherent within students. This is true, we suggest, not only of students with disabilities and those defined as 'having special educational needs', but also of those whose socioeconomic status, race, language and gender renders them problematic to particular teachers in particular schools. Consequently, it is necessary to develop the capacity of those within schools to reveal and challenge deeply entrenched deficit views of 'difference', which define certain types of students as 'lacking something' (Trent et al, 1998).

All of this echoes the evidence of other school improvement research that has drawn attention to the way periods of 'turbulence' arise as attempts are made to change the status quo (Hopkins, Ainscow & West, 1994). Turbulence may take a number of different forms, involving organisational, psychological, technical or micro-political dimensions. At its heart, however, it is about the dissonance that occurs as experienced practitioners struggle to make sense of new ideas and different perspectives on shared experiences. It is interesting to note, too, that there is evidence to suggest that without a period of turbulence, successful, long-lasting change is unlikely to occur. In this sense, turbulence can be seen as a useful indication that schools are, indeed, on the move. The question is, of course, whether those involved in such processes are skilful and experienced enough to cope with periods of difficulty, whether they feel that they are working in a context where thinking differently is acceptable, and whether they are supported in order to arrive at successful changes.

## **Change as a social process**

The accounts we have considered remind us that bringing about change in schools is essentially a social process (Fullan, 2007). Where it is focused on an area of work that is about beliefs and values this is even more apparent, since it inevitably involves an engagement with different views amongst stakeholders. More specifically, in the approach that we are recommending, it requires an engagement with the perspectives of different players within a school in order to analyse barriers to participation and learning that might well result from existing attitudes and practices.

We have recorded many examples of how engaging with evidence, most importantly, that which is generated by students, can be helpful in encouraging potentially constructive dialogue (Ainscow et al, 2006; Ainscow et al, 2012; Harris, Carrington, and Ainscow, 2017; Messiou, 2012; Messiou & Ainscow, 2015; Messiou et al, 2016). Specifically, we have shown how this can help to create space for reappraisal and rethinking by interrupting existing discourses, and by focusing attention on overlooked possibilities for moving practice forward. Such evidence can, we have found, provide interruptions that can help to 'make the familiar unfamiliar' in ways that stimulate the self-questioning, creativity and action that seem to be necessary for moving a school in an inclusive direction.

All of this points to the importance of cultural factors in promoting (or inhibiting) such processes of professional learning. By 'culture' we mean the norms, values and accepted ways of doing things that are reflected in observed practices (Kugelmass, 2004). The extent to which these values include the acceptance and celebration of difference, and a commitment to offering educational opportunities to all students, coupled with the extent to which they are



shared across a school staff, relate to the extent to which students actually are enabled to participate (Dyson, Howes & Roberts, 2004).

Writing about similar processes, Timperley & Robinson (2001) explain how teachers' existing understandings influence the way evidence is interpreted, such that they perceive what they expect to perceive. Consequently, new meanings are only likely to emerge when evidence creates 'surprises'. The role of school principals and other senior staff are crucial in encouraging such rethinking amongst their colleagues. So, for example, Lambert and her colleagues seem to be talking about a similar process in their discussion of what they call 'the constructivist leader'. They stress the importance of leaders gathering, generating and interpreting evidence within a school in order to create an 'inquiring stance'. They argue that such information causes 'disequilibrium' in thinking and, as a result, provides a challenge to existing assumptions about teaching and learning (Lambert et al, 1995).

It seems, then, that the development of more inclusive practices is likely to disturb the thinking of those within a particular organisation. The implication is that senior staff within a school have to provide effective leadership by addressing these challenges in a way that helps to create a climate of openness and trust, within which teacher learning can take place. Sustaining inclusive educational practice therefore requires an uncompromising commitment to principles of inclusion among school leaders (Dyson, Howes & Roberts, 2004).

### **Final thoughts**

Returning to the global agenda promoting inclusion within education systems, the experiences described and analysed in this paper offer reasons for optimism as far as the idea of engaging

with the views of students is concerned. This is particularly significant in the sense that the main resources that they draw on are there in every classroom, in every school in the world.

At the same time, our analysis alerts readers to some of the challenges involved when trying to mobilise these resources. No doubt, some readers will also be thinking about the practical challenges involved, not least that of finding time to collect and engage with evidence that might stimulate new thinking and practices. Our response to this is that time is the currency used within schools to determine what is important. Finding time is, of course, always a challenge during the busy day of a school. Nevertheless, when something is deemed to be important, time is usually found. The argument we have presented in this paper suggests that finding time to engage with student views can pay off in terms of increasing the presence, participation and achievements of all the learners within a school. At the same time, as Mitra (2008) argues “the creation of spaces that include the voices of young people must be developed in ways that avoid tokenism or further alienation of young people.” (p. 238).

Finally, however, there is, for us, an even more important reason to promote greater dialogue between teachers and their students: such an approach is not only a strategy for developing more inclusive forms of education but is itself ‘a manifestation of being inclusive’ (Messiou, 2006). In this sense, engaging with students’ voices is essential, even though it can be both promising and challenging at the same time. The big question is, are we prepared to listen and act on what we hear?

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