Collaborative action research: facilitating inclusion in schools

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which collaborative action research can facilitate the development of inclusive practices and thinking in schools. The paper uses examples from a study that involved three countries and eight secondary schools to illustrate how the process of collaborative action research promoted inclusive thinking and practices.   The study combined a well-established approach of professional development - lesson study - and a framework for engaging with the views of students. This led to a distinctive model of teacher professional development that has at its core the idea of engaging with the views of students. Thematic analysis of data collected from all the settings over three years, highlighted three ways in which collaborative action research led to the promotion of inclusive practices and thinking in schools: through teacher collaboration; through the development of reflective practice; and through student active participation. It is argued that what was distinctive through the process was the fact that collaboration occurred between adults and students, something that is less evident in the collaborative action research literature. Through this process inclusive thinking and practices were developed.

Keywords: inclusive education, students' voices, schools, collaborative action research

Introduction

Inclusive education has been described as an elusive concept, one that is rather difficult to define. Different authors place emphasis on different aspects of inclusive education such as on human interaction, on valuing diversity, or on organisational matters (Florian, 1998). For the purposes of this paper, I take inclusive education to mean the ongoing process of

identifying and removing barriers to the participation and learning of all students in schools (Ainscow, 1999; Booth and Ainscow, 2002). In addition, as Ainscow et al. (2006) suggest, inclusion refers to:

- The processes of increasing the participation of students in, and reducing their exclusion from, the curricula, cultures and communities of schools.
- Restructuring the cultures, policies and practices in schools so that they respond to the diversity of students in their locality.
- The presence, participation and achievement of all students vulnerable to exclusionary pressures, not only those with impairments or those who are categorised as having 'special educational needs' (p. 25)

As argued above, inclusive education is somehow an elusive concept, however, the above set of criteria are useful in helping us think more critically about the practices and the thinking that occur in schools. What these criteria do not specify is how these processes manifest themselves in schools. Taking the first point, for example, one school could employ segregating practices and argue that this is done in order to ensure the participation of certain individuals or certain groups of students. However, some would argue that this could not be seen as an inclusive approach, since it sets students apart and therefore does not facilitate a process of 'learning to live with one another' (Barton, 1997, p. 234). In this sense, I am interested in approaches that are inclusive both in nature and in practice, and reflect values that bring people together, rather than setting them apart.

Mittler (2000) has defined inclusive education as 'about everyone having opportunities for choice and self-determination. In education, it means listening to and valuing what children have to say, regardless of age or labels' (p. viii). Over the last 20 years, there has been an emphasis on the views of children in education. As Cook-Sather (2006) argues, ' a way of thinking has reemerged that strives to reposition school students in educational research and reform.' (p.359). However, engaging with the views of students in schools and in research is not straightforward. As it is documented in a number of studies (e.g. Ainscow and Kaplan, 2005; Bland & Atwah, 2007; Fielding, 2001, 2004; Leitch et al. 2007, Messiou and Hope, 2015), such processes can be challenging and care needs to be taken in order to avoid tokenistic student involvement. Adopting the above definitions of inclusive education then, where everyone is valued and enabled to participate, it seems that students' voices should be at the centre of the process and being given due weight. For me, as I have argued elsewhere,

listening to children's voices in education is a manifestation of being inclusive (Messiou, 2006). In order to do so, collaboration between all those involved seems to be crucial.

A review of studies published in the International Journal of Inclusive Education between 2005 – 2015 (Messiou, 2017) has highlighted that, within the field of inclusive education there have been limited studies that are collaborative and transformative in nature. Based on this finding, and taking into account that inclusive education focuses on participation of all, I have argued for the need for more transformative collaborative studies in the field of inclusive education. By using the term collaborative, I refer to involving the participants, including students, at various stages of the research from the development of research questions through to collecting and analysing data. This paper focuses on one such example, where collaborative action research was used as the methodology of the study, in order to develop more inclusive thinking and practices in schools. Specifically, an exploration of the ways in which the process of collaborative action research facilitated the development of inclusive practices and thinking in schools is explored.

Collaborative action research

Collaborative action research has its origins in action research. Lewin is considered to be the originator of the approach, one that he argued could inform social planning and action (Adelman, 1993). According to Elliot (1991) action research is 'the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it' (p. 69). Action research involves a four-step cyclical process: plan, act, observe and reflect/evaluate. Collaborative action research involves 'climates of inquiry in communities of practice, often with different stakeholders functioning as co-researchers' (p. 345, Mitchell, Reilly, & Logue, 2009). Therefore, it could be argued that what is distinctive in collaborative action research, as opposed to action research, is the coming together of different stakeholders who take on the role of co-researchers and collaborate to understand a social process. In addition, McNiff and Whitehead (2010) argue that at the heart of collaborative action research, involving academics and teachers, there is a concern for educational improvement. Usually, studies that employ collaborative action research processes in education involve collaboration between teachers, or between teachers and researchers (e.g. Butler and Schnellert, 2012; Feldman, 1999; Fernandez-Díaz, Calvo and Rodríguez-Hoyos, 2014; Jaipal and Figg, 2011; Levin and Rock, 2003; Vaino, Holbrook and Rannikmae, 2013) but less often collaboration

between teachers and students in schools (Hadfield and Haw, 2001). At the same time, studies such as the above highlight the benefits of collaborative action research for teacher professional development.

The benefits of teacher collaboration as a facilitator for learning amongst teachers, have been highlighted by Avalos's (2011) review of publications about teacher professional development over ten years. These benefits relate specifically to altering or reinforcing teaching practices. Furthermore, Cordingley, Bell, Evans and Firth (2005) argue that collaboration between teachers, coupled with active experimentation, may be more effective in changing practice, than reflection and discussion about practice alone.

In addition, Bleicher (2014) offers a theoretical framework illustrating how collaborative action research employs four components of professional learning. These are: motivation (including both teacher dispositions and self-efficacy); knowledge; action that might be enacted by teachers; and, reflection.   He presents these components in a cycle to indicate how components feed into one another, whilst, at the same time, highlighting that there is a natural two-way flow between some components, such as between reflection and action.

The link between reflection and action relates to Schon's (1987) ideas 'reflection in action' and 'reflection on action'. As Schon suggests, skilled practitioners have the capacity to analyse situations and use their expertise drawn from prior experience to invent appropriate responses: this process involves reflection-in-action. He also proposes that, for purposes of professional development, opportunities to reflect-on-action can be very helpful.

It can be argued, therefore, that collaborative action research is closely linked to professional learning. The focus of this specific paper is to highlight how this process of collaborative action research can facilitate the development of inclusive practices and thinking. It will do this by using examples from one project that employed this approach.

The project

The project was funded by the European Union and involved thirteen partner organisations in three countries: Spain, Portugal and the UK, five universities and eight secondary schools. The project lasted for three years and involved two cycles of collaborative action research.

The schools that took part were chosen because of the diversity of their student populations and because they had an interest in the focus of the project, that of responding to learner diversity through an engagement with students' voices. Seven of the eight schools had worked with the university researchers in the past in other projects. Therefore, to go back to the action research cycle, these schools were equal partners from the application stage and took part in the development of the specific areas to be explored. Though it was the researchers' agendas that determined the areas of inclusive practices and thinking and students' voices, what would be looked at specifically in each school emerged out of collaboration between researchers, practitioners and students.

Following a planning meeting at the start of the project, where coordinating teachers and researchers attended, the key ideas of the project were explored in more detail. These were: the lesson study approach and a framework for engaging with the views of students in schools. Lesson study is a well established approach in Japan and some other Asian countries (Hiebert et al., 2002; Lo, Yan, & Pakey, 2005; Stigler & Hiebert,1999) and more recently it has also been used in England (e.g. Dudley, 2013). It involves teachers working together, usually in trios, to plan a lesson together. Then, they take turns in teaching the lesson whilst other colleagues involved in the planning observe it. At the end of each lesson, they all analyse it together and refine it, in order to further develop the lesson. A central feature of lesson study is that of collaboration around the specific lesson. In some of the schools in our project, students also became part of the team that designed the lesson and evaluated it. Training was offered to teachers about how to use the lesson study approach, as well as how to gather the views of students through the use of a range of techniques. After the meeting, each of the schools had to trial out a seven-step process which was the result of the first meeting. The seven steps were:

1. Form a working group,
2. Analyse diversity in the school,
3. Collect the views of students,
4. Plan research lessons,
5. Teach the research lessons,
6. Interview students,
7. Identify implications for practice.

A second meeting followed at the end of this phase, which led to the refining of the process and a new formulation of steps. This new formulation involved four overlapping steps, as follows:

1. Form research groups
2. Discuss diversity, learning and teaching
3. Plan, teach and analyse research lessons
4. Identify implications for future practice

As can be seen, traditional action research ideas were embedded in the above process. One distinctive feature of the process was that students were amongst the different stakeholders that took on the role of co-researchers. Sometimes this was in the form of gathering their classmates' views, or in some other examples they took part in designing lessons in collaboration with their teachers. However, all the above steps were followed by each of the schools in the different countries. More details about the project and its findings, including the model of teacher professional development that has emerged from it, as well as the challenges involved in using such approaches in schools, can be found in other publications (Messiou and Ainscow, 2015; Messiou and Hope, 2015; Messiou et al, 2016). The question to be addressed in this article is:

- In what ways do collaborative action research processes promote inclusive practices in schools?

Thematic analysis of transcripts produced during interviews with practitioners and students, and during project meetings, as well as analysis of observations of lessons in schools, led to the identification of three ways in which collaborative action research facilitated inclusive practice and thinking. These are: through teacher collaboration, through reflective practice, and through student active participation. All names used in the extracts from the data below are pseudonyms.

Through teacher collaboration

As mentioned above, collaboration was at the heart of the project. However, collaboration can have varied meanings. As one teacher from Portugal said:

Before, for me, collaborative work just meant task division. I have learned to work in collaboration and I gave it a new importance and priority. I have recognised how much it can be stimulating and motivating to try out new possibilities. If it was not in collaboration a

lot of the classroom activities that I have used wouldn't have just happened. (Lola, 17th May 2013)

The issue of task division that this teacher highlighted here is crucial, since collaboration can indeed be seen as task division. However, what was distinctive in this project was that teachers had to work together, sometimes with student co-researchers, to produce a common output - the lesson. Specifically, in this school in Portugal, the teachers gathered all students' views about aspects of learning in their lessons. They then worked with student co-researchers for the planning of the lesson. In choosing the student co-researchers they ensured that they had students from both genders, students with a range of perceived abilities and students with different behavior profiles. At the same time, teachers had to collaborate to make sense of what the students were suggesting in relation to their lessons and to ensure that they were implementing their suggestions when designing their lessons. And, as the teacher above says, the activities that she ended up using in her own lesson were a result of the collaboration with her colleagues.

In addition, as highlighted by one teacher in England, the whole process:

... challenged us to do something different and that's a positive thing ,it actually boosted out self-esteem to see that trying these new things had worked .It had paid off and that made us feel good as teachers.It was great to share our ideas with somebody else , that was really nice and it was nice to be able to be talking about teaching,talking about the stuff ,talking about the reasons when we joined the profession in the first place.It can often be forgotten and that was really good to actually have some reflective time just as three professionals to share that and it is nice to be able to collaboratively plan with a colleague. Again sharing ideas,discussing ways of refining a process and that was a really positive experience as professionals. (Peter, 22nd June 2012)

Similar to the previous teacher, the issue of sharing ideas with other colleagues is also emphasised by this teacher. Through the collaborative action research process, teachers moved beyond simple sharing, into planning collaboratively with colleagues. The result was more engaging lessons with specific ideas that developed through this collaboration.

Through reflective practice

This form of collaboration also allowed teachers to be reflective of their own practices.   For example, one teacher from England, with over 20 years of experience, who worked in a trio with another experienced teacher and a newly qualified teacher, said:

it's been good staff development,I'd probably say for all of us.I have never - I've been teaching a long time - and I've never said "what do you like doing kids?", never,so it was good.I mean since we've had interactive whiteboards it's been fantastic,especially with the younger ones that they're able to come up and do things, I do think probably that I do like to be in control and I won't deny that but I think,you know,I'm more than open,as is Paul and certainly Sophie as a new teacher to try new things and do different things. I mean the iPods have been great for me, I've thoroughly enjoyed seeing how much they've enjoyed and benefitted from using them,the fact they can record themselves it helps them with their speaking ,it helps them to memorise things and it's nice to do a little bit of peer assessment, they can listen to each other,see what they've done well and what they need to improve on. (Bella, 21st June 2012)*

In a way, this teacher seems to admit that in the past she never asked her students what they like in her lessons. In doing so, it allowed her to reflect on how she was organising her own lessons. Working collaboratively with two other colleagues and listening to the views of the students enabled her to try the use of technology in her lessons.   Though the use of technology might be seen as something that most teachers do these days, for this individual teacher this was not the case. Therefore, listening to the views of her students on the one hand, and collaborating with her other colleagues, on the other hand, encouraged her to observe new ways of working and make her reflect on her own ways of teaching her lessons, and eventually change some of her practices.

At the same time, through the observation of their colleagues, teachers became more aware of what they were doing in lessons. As one teacher in Spain said:

Observations also were very, very interesting and I think we shall try to make all the school do the same process, going through observation of all the teachers 'cause you learn. One of the things they say is we need teachers to be more ... less stressed, talking in a specific way and all that. When you observe all the teacherswe will be taking care of those specific areas,you see that how he's talking or she's like asking the students or,and being calm, you observe things that when you are teaching you are not aware of so that was very interesting

and we made the students raise their hands,we raise our hands for everybody,it's the polite sign also because we have the students,so instead of saying "ok ,you haven't raised your hand,you've raised your hand". No,.we say ... thank you for raising your hand to the one that is raising it and that makes the whole class stop so those little things for us are also important and because the students were saying those things and planning in that way and also observing each other help us and all. (Artemis, June 21st 2012)

So, in a way, she reflected on the way that teachers (including herself) try to encourage students to raise their hands in lessons. As a result, she made changes to her own practices. Similarly, another teacher in England, when observing one of his colleagues admitted:

I think (teacher's name) has got a very calm style. It rubs off on the kids. I watched how she circulated round the class. That calm style wouldn't work with my group, or is that the way we've moulded them? They're a lot lower ability and it takes a lot of energy to get them to put pen to paper. There are a lot of behavioural issues. I feel shattered at the end. If I was calmer perhaps they would mellow? I would be nervous about my students being able to be so independent. You didn't quite tell them everything they needed to do (talking to his colleague). My students couldn't do that, or maybe it's about my expectations of my student? It's partly to do with who the students are but it's also to do with expectations. (John, 17th May 2013)

Here we see how deficit ways of thinking about students, such as perceived low ability and assumptions about what they might be able to do, affected the specific teacher's way of behaving in the class. However, by observing his colleague enabled him to reconsider his own views about his students, as well as the impact that the way he behaves in the classroom might have on students' way of behaving.

Through student active participation

Students actively participated through the project in varying ways in the different schools. In some schools, the students were asked to express their views through participatory techniques, such as through the use of post it notes, writing down what helps them with their

learning and what makes it difficult for them in lessons. Such techniques were used with all students in the classes that took part. Other approaches were also used during focus group interviews, such as the Diamond Nine Activity where students working in groups are given statements about learning and participation and they have to rank them according to what they think is most important to what they think is least important. The activity can act as a facilitator for discussion in order to understand how students see issues of learning and teaching in lessons. Data gathered through such activities were then analysed by teachers with support from researchers and had to be embedded within the design of the lessons. What was important, was that the students could see that their teachers listened to their views and acted on them, by trying to introduce in their lessons some of their ideas. As one student said:

I really felt I was part of the lesson and I felt I was participating because we ourselves were leading the lesson (Mario, 15th March 2013)

In other words, the fact that they had an input of how the lesson was organised enabled them to gain a sense of ownership, or leading the lesson as he said. In addition, on some occasions groups of students became co-researchers that collected data from their classmates that they then analysed, whereas in some other occasions some students and teachers worked collaboratively to design a lesson. As one teacher from Portugal said about the process of the project:

Here the concept of participation goes far beyond the traditional." (Mimi, 6th June 2013)

In all lessons that were carried out as part of the project process, the teachers saw improvements in the active engagement of students. For example, a trio of teachers in England that worked together for Geography lessons, taking into account their students' views, started their lessons with a key question to solve which was seen as very helpful in students' participation. At the same time the students were encouraged to ask questions at the start of the lesson which, as one of the students said, this was not something that they were doing in previous lessons and was seen as helpful. As she explained:

In the beginning when we could ask questions about what we were doing and how the hurricanes were formed and what places they were hitting, we could make up the questions. (Stela, 24th March 2012)

In addition, all the students in these Geography lessons felt that everyone was included in these specific lessons.

In another example, the teacher rather than forming a trio with her colleagues - something that she had done in the first round of the collaborative action research- decided to work with a group of student co-researchers to refine her lesson. The student co-researchers were from a different age group to the one that the lesson was taught and older in age compared to the students in the class. The teacher used the knowledge that she gained through the first round of collaborative action research about various ways in which student participation could be increased such as the use of games and other resources in the lesson. These were ideas suggested by the students of the class previously and that have been used in the first round of the collaborative action research by the trio of teachers who collaborated for the lessons then. This particular lesson (where the teacher collaborated with the student co-researchers) focused on the differences between teacher led versus student led activities in lessons, a focus that the student co- researchers themselves chose. In other words, here we can see how the planning phase truly involved collaborative processes between teachers, student co - researchers and researchers. Student co- researchers were not involved in the design of the lesson. So, the teacher designed the first lesson with this focus in mind, as well as taking into account ideas from the previous round in order to develop a lesson that employed inclusive practices and promoted student participation. The student co-researchers and the university researcher observed this lesson. Below is a record of the lesson observation:

Lesson: Year 8 French lesson, 14th March 2013

Time of lesson: 9:00 – 10:40 am

Classroom arrangement:

The tables were arranged in horseshoe shape with some tables in the middle. There were 17 students in the class (8 boys and 9 girls). Students were sat next to whomever they wanted. They had to follow the same seating arrangement every week but they chose who they would be sitting next to.

Lesson:

The lesson was a revision lesson. The first activity involved the students looking in their dictionaries to find a list of words that were on the board (adverbs of time, qualifiers and

connectives). Each of the students had a dictionary. The teacher reminded them how to look for a word to translate from French to English. The teacher kept going around helping students who struggled. She sat down with one particular girl who struggled and quickly enough she realised that her difficulty was not searching words in the dictionary but the fact that she did not know the alphabet well. The teacher wrote the alphabet on the students' whiteboard and showed her how she should use it to find a word. The girl kept saying "I know my alphabet" but the teacher told her "I know the alphabet too but sometimes I have to do it like this to find a word". Interestingly enough when the teacher left, the girl carried on using the alphabet and she also helped two students next to her when they were struggling to find a word by showing them how to use the alphabet that the teacher wrote for her on the whiteboard.

The second activity involved the millionaire game which is based on the popular tv game "Who wants to be a millionaire". The teacher sets a question and gives the students four options to choose from each time. Only one option is the correct one. When the four options are given on the screen students wrote on their white board the answer they thought it was the correct one and had to hold it up. All students were actively engaged in this activity and seemed to enjoy it.

The final activity was the student led activity where the students were asked to draw a board game and use French phrases/words. It was entirely up to the students how they would approach it. The teacher did not really get involved in supporting them (and this was intentional) but when students approached her to ask her questions she was, of course, supporting them. It seemed as if all students were actively participating in this part of the lesson.

As can be seen, the lesson was divided in two parts. The first part was teacher led and the second part was student led. The teacher described the first part as the "normal" lesson, what they usually do, whereas the second part as being something that students would lead on. The second and last activity enabled all students to actively participate whereas during the first activity some students did not really seem to be engaged. What is important here is that all the activities were planned as a result of an engagement with the views of all students and the discussions that took place in the first round of the collaborative action research, where it emerged that games were something that the students not only valued but also allowed them to be actively participating.

As mentioned above, the student co-researchers suggested the initial focus of attention for the lesson. They observed the lesson, alongside me as a researcher. At the same time, they gathered students' views (those students who were participating in the lesson). The student co-researchers prepared a sheet which included the following areas (student enjoyment, participation, learning). These were the areas that they kept notes about whilst observing. In addition, at the bottom of the page they left space for any additional comments. Furthermore, the student co-researchers wanted to gather the views of the classroom students as well, beyond their own observations. The way in which to gather the students' in the classroom views was decided by student co-researchers in collaboration with the teacher and the researchers. In particular, the teacher allowed them 10 minutes towards the end of the last activity in order to gather students' views. Whilst the classroom students were working, the co-researchers were going around the class asking them their views about the lesson and they kept brief notes. At the same time, one of the co-researchers was taking out of class some students and asking them the same questions but was recording their responses. In this way, the student co-researchers had audio recordings to use for analysing the data later, in order to have a better understanding of the students' views.

A boy in the class responded to the student researcher saying that participation was very good but it could be improved. The student explained that he referred to his own participation in the lesson and that it was very good but it could be improved. When asked by the researcher what he meant he said that he could have put his hand up more. Asking him why he did not do that, he said that he struggled a bit. Asking him if he thinks that his teacher could do something to improve his participation, his answer was "I don't know". This boy was very quiet during the lesson and seemed shy too.

After the lesson the student co-researchers, the teacher and the university researcher all gathered to discuss the lesson. The student co-researchers led the session in a very impressive way. One of them took the role of the facilitator and asked each of the student co-researchers in turn to give their views on the lesson as well as give feedback based on what the students in the class said. Overall, the student researchers offered positive comments, however, some identified areas for improvement. Specifically, one of the students said that the first activity carried on for a long time and that some of the students looked bored when they were doing it. The student co-researcher suggested timing this activity and doing it like a competition so that the students are more engaged. Straight after this feedback the teacher told the student co-researchers that she was going to teach the

lesson again next week in another class and based on their feedback she would time the first activity and do it in a more competitive way so that students would be more engaged. So, here we can see how student co-researchers actively participated in the research process and were in a position to offer specific suggestions for improvements in the lessons. It is also interesting to note, that student co-researchers' observations and comments about the lessons were very similar to those of the researcher. Finally, when the teacher heard what the quiet boy said about his participation she also thought about other ways that could be used, beyond raising a hand that could allow less confident learners to participate. For example, instead of having to raise their cards in the "Millionaire" game they could have just written the response and check for themselves, without having to show to the rest of the class their answer which might have been wrong.

Discussion

The benefits of collaborative action research on teacher professional development or professional learning has been highlighted in previous studies (Bleicher, 2014; Butler and Schnellert, 2012; Feldman, 1999; Fernandez-Díaz, Calvo and Rodríguez-Hoyos, 2014; Jaipal and Figg, 2011; Levin and Rock, 2003; Vaino, Holbrook and Rannikmae, 2013). Hadfield and Haw (2001) have rightly argued that 'when we talk of collaborative action research in the classroom we still seem to mean research that goes on between teachers, rather than between teachers and their pupils' (p. 486). The project from which the examples in this paper come, is one where practitioners, students and researchers collaborated in the research process. The ways in which the collaborative action research facilitated the development of inclusive practices and thinking relate to three interrelated areas: teacher collaboration, reflective practice and student active participation. Similar to Bleicher's (2014) theoretical model, where reflection relates to action through a two-way process, we also saw in this study how the teachers reflected on their practices through this collaborative action research and made changes accordingly. At the same time, not only teacher collaboration and reflective practice led to actions but also the active participation of students enabled for further reflection and changes in current practices, as we saw in the last example where the teacher made further changes as a result of the student co-researchers' feedback. Through the process of collaborative action research teachers and students came closer in their ways of working, as well as in their ways of understanding one another. As a result, we saw a change of practices, moving towards practices that were more inclusive of all.

Returning back to Ainscow et al.'s (2006) definition of inclusion as 'the processes of increasing the participation of students in, and reducing their exclusion from, the curricula, cultures and communities of schools' (p.25), we can see how through this process the participation of all students was increased in lessons. At the same time, this was achieved in an inclusive way within the mainstream classroom, like for example with the use of additional sources for certain students, as it was the case with the student who was encouraged to use the alphabet in order to list the words in alphabetical order. More importantly, all students' active participation strongly relates to the notion of inclusive education. For some students, such as those that took the role of co-researchers, participation was also increased outside lessons, by taking new roles through this collaborative action research. In addition, the process allowed for the identification of barriers to learning and participation, in relation to minor details sometimes. For example, as the teacher in Spain highlighted, they realised that praising those students that raised their hand, instead of saying to students that they have not raised their hands to do so, seemed like a more inclusive approach that would encourage all to participate.

It should be noted that levels of student participation varied in each of the schools through involvement in this project. As stated earlier, where improvements in students' participation did occur, this was achieved through a range of techniques that were used to facilitate the expression of their views. This in turn, led to changes of practices that enabled all students to be actively participating in lessons, as we saw, for example, in the Geography lesson in the English school. At the same time, those students who took on the role of co-researchers participated at a different level in a much more authentic way.

Conclusion

Collaborative action research can make significant contributions in schools being involved in such processes, both for individuals as well as for organisations as a whole. It has the potential of bringing change in the ways of thinking and acting. What this paper has argued is that it also has the potential of facilitating the development of inclusive thinking and practices, since it allows teachers to collaborate with other colleagues, students and researchers and explore varying ways of thinking and practices. Through this exploration a restructuring of practices and thinking can occur. This can be achieved through a genuine collaboration of teachers to design a lesson together, which allows them to reflect on their

own practices and make relevant changes, whilst at the same time creating opportunities for active participation for all students.

In this project, all students had some input to the design of the lessons, by offering their views through the various techniques that were used before the first lesson was designed. Furthermore, in certain schools, some students that took the role of co-researchers had even greater involvement in the design of the lessons by suggesting specific activities or how the students would be organised in groups. Such students were either ones that belonged in traditionally marginalised groups (such as those from different ethnic backgrounds), or others that the teachers wanted to give them such an opportunity because they had not had previously a key role in school.

All of this raises important questions about participation and responding to student diversity. One of the strengths of the project was that all students were given opportunities to express their views about learning and teaching. However, there were some that were given more opportunities than others, as we saw in some of the examples. Finally, it is interesting to note that even though there were contextual differences in each of the schools in the different countries, the three factors that emerged as important for facilitating inclusion - teacher collaboration, reflective practice, and student active participation. - applied in all of the contexts.

Barton (1997) has argued that inclusive education is 'about responding to diversity; …. about listening to unfamiliar voices, being open, empowering all members' (p. 233). As seen through this project, collaborative action research can facilitate efforts to listen to unfamiliar voices within a school, with a view to empowering all, and can lead to the development of inclusive thinking and practices.

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