Student voice for promoting inclusion in primary schools

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Abstract

This paper reports on the findings of a study that involved collaborative action research with primary schools (5 – 11-year-olds) in one city in the South of England. The study focused on exploring how inclusion in schools can be promoted through an engagement with student voice. Data analysed involved detailed lesson observations, fieldnotes from meetings between teachers and children, interviews with teachers and children and notes from network meetings. The findings of the study suggest that inclusion can be promoted in schools when 1) a dynamic process of making students heard is employed by: using participatory student voice activities; valuing what students say through a process of dialogue; and moving into actions; and 2) when adult mindsets are open to such ideas and make these mindsets explicit through specific behaviours. The paper concludes by arguing that primary school children are not only able to be engaged in such processes, but more importantly, can throw a different light to collaborative efforts to become more inclusive in schools.

Keywords

Introduction

Student voice has been directly linked to notions of inclusion, in addition to being seen as a way for promoting inclusion in schools. For example, Mittler (2000, vii) argues that inclusion: "In education, (it) means listening to and valuing what children have to say, regardless of age or labels", whilst others have argued that listening to students' voices is a manifestation of being inclusive (Messiou 2006). Allan (2021) contends that in order to develop inclusive and democratic societies in education we might direct our efforts towards engaging children and young people in the task of creating inclusive environments. The study analysed in this paper started with a similar position: that an engagement with students' voices can be a way for developing and promoting inclusion in schools. In this article, we focus on exploring what such a process involves.

Defining inclusion

Inclusion is a contested term with varying definitions. We adopt Ainscow's (2007) broad concept of inclusion as an ongoing process of finding ways to reach out to *all* learners with a focus on their presence, participation, and achievement. At the same time, we view inclusion as a principled approach to education (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006) which focuses on exploring barriers to learning and identifying ways to remove such barriers for the benefit of all learners. There have been efforts to promote inclusive principles across the world, particularly through international policy developments (e.g., UNESCO 2020). Whilst many would agree with the principles of inclusion, it has been argued that there is a gap between the rhetoric of inclusion and practices.

In this paper, we argue that one way to address this gap is by placing more emphasis on children's and young people's views in schools as the starting point for further developing inclusive practices in schools. Kozleski (2020, 340) argues that inclusive education "honors

divergent perspectives, capacities, and approaches to learning". Such diverse views and approaches can come from students and teachers working collaboratively to identify areas that can be further developed for promoting inclusion in schools.

Conceptualising Student Voice

Student voice is a broad-ranging term and indicates myriad meanings and interpretations. A common way of describing student voice is students articulating and speaking up about their perspectives, opinions, feelings, choices, suggestions, and feedback (Holdsworth 1988; Payne 2007). Student voice efforts either tend to stem from the belief that children have unique perspectives and insights about schooling that need to be responded to (Cook-Sather 2006), or from a sense of moral commitment of ensuring that children are given an opportunity to express (Wisby 2011). Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989) espouses that all children have the right to express their views and their voices need to be listened to and considered. The term 'student voice' therefore encompasses a broad range of actions and student behaviours, including their presence, their expression of views through verbal or non-verbal means, discussion and dialogue about matters that concern them, as well as playing an active role in decisions that hold implications for the school and its stakeholders (Fielding and McGregor 2005; Cook-Sather 2006).

Other dimensions that need to be considered when defining student voice are the issues of diversity, multiplicity and singularity of voice. Cruddas (2006) advocates using the concept of 'engaging with voices' instead of just 'voice', in order to acknowledge the dynamic nature and multiplicity of voices. Thomson (2011) emphasises the concerns about singularity of voice and examining whose agenda drives the engagement with voices. Silences are as important as the spoken word, and should not be connoted as neutral, but as integral voices that need to be listened to (Lewis 2010). This holds implications for schools to afford

multiple modes and opportunities through which student voice can be expressed. Highlighting the multiplicity of voices, Messiou (2019) notes that student voice is complex and differences in views need to be considered while responding to student voice.

In a nutshell, Cook-Sather (2006, 363) asserts that "there can be no simple, fixed definition or explication of the term". Within this constantly evolving paradigm, student voice is dynamic and contextual, and is shaped by the interactions within the context (Messiou 2023), and therefore it must be appreciated that student voice goes beyond the stated words or behaviours of individual students and can never be fully captured in research (Mazzei 2009).

Student voice initiatives in schools

Student voice in schools is commonly sought through modes of consulting with students. Student consultation entails conversations and discussions between teachers and students about learning, actively listening to students talking about what matters to them in school and building a comprehensive understanding through joint inquiry, to drive positive change in the school (Fielding 2004a; Rudduck 2006). Such consultation with students has been categorised by Thompson (2009) as proactive, constrained or managerial, characterised by teachers' motivation and approach towards student consultation, thereby implying that even though teachers may consult with students and seek their opinions, they may not necessarily actively listen to or respond to those opinions. Gonzalez, Hernandez-Saca, and Artiles (2017), through the review of 49 student voice studies published between 1990 to 2010 in peer-reviewed journals in USA, described three purposes that drive student voices initiatives: school change, student empowerment and teaching-learning of the curriculum.

A range of empirical studies (e.g., Cook-Sather 2009; Fielding 2004a; Goodnough 2014; Groundwater-Smith, Mayes, and Arya-Pinatyh 2014; Mayes 2020; Messiou and Ainscow 2020; Mitra 2001; Mitra and Serriere 2012; Robinson and Taylor 2013; Rudduck 2006;

Rudduck and McIntyre 2007; Thompson 2009; Thomson and Gunter, 2008) have highlighted the complexities associated with understanding student voice initiatives in schools. Across these studies, the role of teachers (or other adults in schools) and students (or children and young people) has been pivotal in determining how student voice is shaped and how school change or improvement is impacted. Predominantly, schools operate with an adult-centred framework (Devine 2003) and there exists a distinct power dynamic between teachers and students, as one is immensely more powerful than the other (Fielding 2004b). How this power is negotiated and the scope of agency that is afforded to students to influence the decisions and practices within that context, reflects the school's underlying agenda and commitment to student voice. Even though it may not be practically possible to incorporate everything that students might suggest, acknowledging their views by modifying practices, might result in enabling a more inclusive setting (Nutbrown and Clough 2009).

When student voice efforts lean into tokenism or co-optation, characterised by a lack of responsiveness to students' voices, it may lead to an alienation of students, negatively impacting their agency and sense of belonging (Alderson 2000; Lundy 2007). A tokenistic approach is reflective of an authoritative culture where the desire for institutional control and managerial agenda is prevalent, students' participation is limited, students may be ascribed procedural roles and shared dialogues with students are restricted. Challenging this tokenistic approach, the works of Mitra and Serriere (2012) and Messiou and Ainscow (2020) position students as important stakeholders in the school who are not merely passive observers and illustrate how student voice can be fostered through dialogic inquiry and reciprocal interactions with students, which can result in transformative change for school improvement. More specifically, Mitra and Serriere's (2012) study highlights how student involvement led to students' growth of agency, belonging and competence, whereas Messiou and Ainscow (2020) illustrate how primary school children working collaboratively with their teachers for

the design of lessons that include all learners can bring about change in classroom practices and more widely across a school. In addition, other studies have highlighted how student voice approaches can lead to stronger relationships between teachers and students (Baroutsis, McGregor, and Mills 2016; Fielding and Bragg 2003; Fielding 2004a; Hope 2012). Overall, most student voice studies have taken place in secondary schools, especially ones that involved students as researchers (Gonzalez, Hernandez-Saca, and Artiles 2017; Robinson 2014).

The study and its methodology

The design of the study was informed by collaborative action research approaches where different stakeholders become co-researchers (Mitchell, Reilly, and Logue 2009). A group of five primary schools (age range 5-11) in a city in the South of England were involved in the study, with the focus being on finding ways to listen to all children's voices to promote greater inclusion in learning processes. At the same time, the study focused on the introduction of a range of participatory student voice research activities (e.g., visual images, drama, posters etc.). Ethical approval of this study was obtained from the University's Research Ethics Committee. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

A presentation was made to a group of primary schools headteachers in the city of Southampton, who were then invited to take part in the study. Five schools (A, B, C, D, E) were involved, all serving deprived areas in the city. Four of these schools had ethnically diverse student populations. From each school a trio of teachers participated in a workshop at the university. During the workshop participants had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the key concepts of the study (inclusion and student voice) and explore the principles of collaborative action research, as well as a range of participatory activities to engage with the views of students in schools.

In essence, the study involved teams of teachers in each school, working collaboratively to conduct a study about an area of concern that related to inclusion, and agreed a plan of how they would explore this, using the student voice lens and participatory approaches. Through discussions during the workshop each team identified an area of concern in their school that was related to inclusion. These were: 'unlocking' learners; developing boys' writing; expanding students' future job aspirations; and increasing children's willingness to write. Draft research questions for each of these areas were formulated during the meeting. Following the workshop, each of the schools refined their research questions, through further discussions amongst them and other members in the schools, including the headteachers. The researchers from the university, also supported with the refinement of the research questions and the decisions of which participatory activities to use for each exploration.

Having identified their areas of focus, the inquiry teams in each school, worked alongside children (5–11-year-olds), either by employing various student voice activities working with the whole class, or through training selected students to become student researchers who then collected and analysed relevant data to support the school's identified area of focus. In this way, new avenues of exploration were co-constructed through dialogues between children and teachers and solutions to the identified areas were addressed through students' active participation. University researchers supported schools as they explored these ideas, in addition to monitoring developments in each of the schools through collection of data. There were also network meetings as the work was progressing, which acted as a source of support amongst schools and facilitated the exchange of ideas amongst the group members.

Data collected involved detailed lesson observations, fieldnotes from meetings between teachers and students, interviews with teachers and students and notes from network meetings. The use of multiple data sources and researchers ensured the trustworthiness of the study (Flick 2018). Authors triangulated data by collecting data from various sources. Peer

scrutiny was conducted to confirm the accuracy of notes and interview transcriptions. Conversation and debriefing between university researchers were conducted regularly to discuss the coding process and explore themes, which improved the trustworthiness of the findings. We also kept reflective commentary notes during the process of data collection and analysis to reveal our biases (Ortlipp 2008).

Audio data and field notes gathered from all schools were transcribed and stored in NVivo 1.6.1, a qualitative data management and analysis software. The data analysis involved an inductive process that follows the six phases of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Coding was initially conducted by the third and the fourth authors. After the initial analysis, the research team discussed the content and reviewed preliminary codes. The third and fourth authors then re-read data, independently identified codes, organised codes into categories and themes. Subsequently, the whole team read the code books, recognised and refined the themes and achieved a final consensus through ongoing discussion.

In this article we focus on the study's overarching question:

How can we promote inclusion through an engagement with students' voices in schools?

Findings

Two overall themes emerged through data analysis in relation to the above focus. First, we argue that inclusion can be promoted in schools through our focus on students' voices when 1) a dynamic process of making students heard is employed by using participatory student voice activities; valuing what students say through a process of dialogue; and moving into actions; and 2) when adult mindsets are open to such ideas and make these mindsets explicit through specific behaviours.

A dynamic process of making students heard

Each school, as we explained above, had the flexibility of using a range of participatory approaches to engage with the views of students. Our analysis highlights that three interconnected processes were important for promoting inclusion: adopting a range of participatory activities, valuing what students say through a process of dialogue between students and teachers, and taking actions to make changes based on students' views.

1. Using participatory student voice activities

Each school utilised at least two participatory activities, such as drawings, photo elicitation, posters, post-it notes, unfinished sentences, video activities, mind maps, diamond nine tasks, etc. These allowed students to express their views through a range of means.

In Schools A and D, drawings were used as a tool for students to express their job aspirations and the associated skills needed to achieve those aspirations. The drawings were used in an interactive way. The teachers went around the class and discussed children's ideas whilst they were drawing. This gave the teachers a better understanding of children's thoughts and specific aspirations. For example, one child said they wanted to be a beekeeper when they grow up. Though the Year 3 Teacher in School A, knew that this child was interested in nature, she did not know that he had this thought as a future job.

Photo elicitation was used to facilitate the conversations with children in Schools B and C. Pictures chosen by the teachers were used to prompt students to discuss which students in the pictures were confident in their learning (School C) and how these pictures linked with their own experiences in the writing lessons (School B). In School E, the Diamond Nine activity was used where children were divided into groups and given four simple statements about writing (e.g. 'My writing should be about something I like'), accompanied by related pictures. Each group had to rank the four statements in order of importance, with the support

of an adult. Inevitably, there was no agreement amongst all children, and they decided to rank them by voting about each statement. However, the activity allowed adults to discuss with each child in more depth their own ideas.

Another method that was used by School C was classroom observations. Student researchers were trained on carrying out observations and practised keeping records of a lesson, by using a template with key questions that teachers had prepared in advance, focusing on the aspect of confidence in learning and what helps children in lessons. The participating teachers reported that students noticed details that teachers had never noticed before. For instance, during the observations, a Year 6 student researcher noticed the 'Worry Box', which was placed behind the white board. After the observation, during the dialogue with the Lead teacher, the Year 6 student explained that she spotted the Worry Box in the corner, behind the big white board. She further added,

> We have a worry box in our class. And the teacher just says like if you have any worries, you can write them down on a note and you can put them inside the worry box. And she helped me with the worry once, and it did help a lot.

Such participatory activities allow students to engage with their learning environments and provide teachers an opportunity to view the learning environment from the student's lens. As the lead teacher at School C said, "She (student researcher) noticed it and we didn't see it at all. So yeah, it is interesting the things that they come up with." Also, a Year 6 student researcher noted from the lesson being observed that the teacher, while giving the lesson instructions started with the word 'first' which the student identified as clearly laying out the steps of the instruction. The teacher reported that the student's observation was helpful thinking about their lessons.

2. Valuing what students say through a process of dialogue

The above methods were useful for allowing children to express their views. However, what was more important for promoting inclusion in schools was demonstrating to students that what they were expressing was valued by their teachers. Where this happened, it occurred through a process of dialogue. For example, in School B, following the photo elicitation session, where the four student researchers collected other students' views with the support of their teachers, they went on to discuss what they noticed around the discussion of a particular image,

> Student researcher 1 Year 4: So, Boy X said about this boy (on the image) that he was taking ideas and they were maybe like writing it down, like all the other children.
>
> Student researcher 2 Year 4: People thought that though, because sometimes they want to work independently and sometimes, they want to work with a teacher.
>
> Lead teacher: Yeah, and that's what I heard. Is that what you heard as well?
>
> Year 5 teacher: Yeah, this table here, were very set on just two children (in the image). So, they like to work in pairs. They said that too much of a big group distracts them, and they don't actually like the bigger group. Very interesting.
>
> Year 4 teacher: So, they felt a lot more confident once they've worked like that because they've shared ideas and they're more confident than to go off and then start their writing.

The Year 5 teacher reflected further in one network meeting,

> Just to have all of them together and really unpick everything they were saying and actually going back and forth with them as well, it was really interesting. Some of them were saying that they didn't like the input on the carpet being so long, but then they were really worried about not knowing what to do. So, we were kind of saying to

them, well, if you don't want the input that long, how are you going to know what to

do? And it was having that real in-depth conversation with them.

The value of dialogue was also highlighted by another teacher in School C when she said,

Dialogue is what gave us the most information, we sat down at the table with children

and that's when ask questions and get feedback.

3. Moving into actions

The teachers in each of the schools were discussing the issues that were emerging from

students' ideas. These discussions led to teachers keep reflecting on their own practices and

identifying the modifications that could be introduced in their school. As the lead teacher in

School C explained, "I wanted them to realise that their voice does go somewhere". In School

B teachers incorporated modifications in writing lessons based on children's ideas. For

example, they reduced the teacher input on the carpet and provided a choice to the students to

return to the tables and seek help if needed. At the same time, they provided an opportunity to

students to talk to each other about their ideas and then invite them to share what they heard

from the student they were speaking to.

Another example relating to students' writing is in School E. Teachers gave students in the

reception classes the opportunity to talk about what they wanted to write about through

creating posters, and then worked together to summarise the most popular topics, such as

'family' and 'animals', which were then embedded into teaching plans and writing tasks. At

the end of the process, it was impressive to see that the most reluctant writers in these classes,

had started to show their willingness to write about the topics that interested them. It is

important to note that not all ideas that emerged from participatory activities were acted upon.

For example, in this school, teachers used cameras to allow students take pictures of what

helps them in Maths lessons. Due to movement of teachers within the school, children's ideas were not explored in more detail in the end, despite teachers' original intentions.

In School C, as a result of the whole process, the Year 4 teachers included worked examples in the lessons of English and Geography. This was suggested by the student researchers who observed the lessons, as a practice that is helpful for children. As two of the student researchers noticed,

> G2 (Year 5, girl, student researcher): For example, in geography class, when I was there, there were more examples, as the same like the English one.

> G3 (Year 6, girl, student researcher): I think that it seems like... what helps children's learning and got more examples. Examples also make the classroom nicer.

Adult mindsets and explicit behaviours that communicate those mindsets

1. Teachers' mindsets and conceptualisations of student voice

Each teacher's mindset and conceptualisations of student voice differed. Overall, we saw how certain mindsets and conceptualisations evolved through the process of engaging with students' voices. For example, the lead teacher in School C talked about how her perspectives have changed,

> I think maybe I started off a bit cynical about what we're going to find out. That's actually I've done this at four different schools and maybe it's just the length of time and actually they are just going to say we want the pirate ship back on the playground and actually perhaps a bit just, yeah, cynical to view of what were they going to say…That was going to be meaningful to us as a school or to us as teachers. What was it actually going to bring us? … but then when we did the practice of the pupil researchers training, practice observations and then the dialogue back in the office. That was really powerful, and I can see exactly how beneficial it would be… Actually,

as the children and we're more confident, we're able to give those things, it then

turned into actually wow, this is really valuable project to do and it's really beneficial

for teachers because they've given us specific things that we can do in our practice

that's going to help all children … So, I think that's definitely changed my mindset.

Others admitted being confused at the beginning of the process. One of the Year 4 teachers in School C reported that, "After the first meeting, I was just more like ohh, now I have like 10 more million questions in my head, but I didn't have a clear picture", while as the research progressed, she said "I feel like it's sort of dominos, everything sort of found its place from there". Other teachers in other schools also expressed how they grappled with the uncertainty of not knowing exactly how they would proceed initially. However, as the study progressed, they realised how they could not possibly have had a complete plan beforehand, as the views of students were integral to determining and planning the next steps. At the end of the project, teachers acknowledged the value of student voice. For example, a Year 3 teacher from School D noted, "If you give them the opportunity to explore and find paths, then they can find them themselves as well". Another Year 3 teacher in School A said, "It's given me a real opportunity to listen to the children because I feel like sometimes…it's tricky to spend that time in listening to the children". Teachers also reflected how participating in this project helped them become more open, as one Year 3 teacher in School D said in an interview,

So much to do all the time sometimes. You truly forget about why? Why they might

be passive and then it's like taking that step back and actually thinking. This project

probably opened our mind that maybe we do think about more about the structure of

our lessons and the questions we do ask children, maybe they're not being passive.

2. Explicit behaviours

Encouraging active participation: The use of participatory activities allowed student active participation. However, some schools provided the opportunity for pupils to take a more active role. For example, two schools trained student researchers on how to carry out research and conduct participatory activities in a series of sessions. In School B, the student researchers led one of the sessions with their classmates, with the support of their teachers. At the beginning of the session the lead teacher highlighted to other children in the class how the student researchers were now 'experts' since they have completed these activities before and were now able to collect their classmates' views. However, despite the encouragement for active participation, the teachers did step in at times to support the whole process, since they felt 'frustrated' when student researchers did not dive deeper in the conversations with other students, in the way that the teachers would expect them. As they discussed below,

> Year 4 teacher: I normally get a better level of depth out of that child with their response and seeing another child say okay and should be fine with that… You're like, well come on, probe a bit more! I think that's possibly where my frustration comes, where I want to get more out of them, I want to say, oh, well, I know you can get a bit deeper than that.
>
> Lead teacher: So, it's quite hard to take that back seat because I'm not used to it, and that's what I was saying about maybe exploring as a team...
>
> Year 4 teacher: We're basically just control freaks. That's why it's contagious!
>
> Year 5 teacher: Yeah, yeah, yeah. We all are!
>
> Lead teacher: Yeah, and I think you get very used to hearing your own voice. And I think that shift of power... is not that I don't... it's not that I resent them, it's just that I'm not... it's not good enough.

Positive reinforcement and collaboration: After hearing students' ideas, teachers thanked their students and gave positive reinforcement by saying, for example, "It's nice to hear your viewpoints. I'm definitely gonna be taking on some of your ideas. It's gonna really help me", or, "I mean, your recommendations are brilliant. I think you've really had a really mature approach, so thank you".

In addition, some teachers viewed the process as collaborative work. As one Year 4 teacher in School C explained in the interview,

> It was a joint exploration with the children as well, I think. We learned and understood as we went along and it developed as we went along. It wasn't necessarily what we'd set out to do. But it's sort of naturally evolved, didn't it?

Such ideas were communicated to students during the project and were echoed by student researchers too. As a Year 6 student researcher in the same school said, "I'd like to move like together because it makes us like a team, just feel like a part of a team".

Discussion

Two key strands emerged as important for promoting inclusion through an engagement with student voice: firstly, through the employment of various range of participatory approaches, the process of dialogue and the implementation of changes; and, secondly, through shifting adults' mindsets and ensuring that behaviours illustrate that students' voices can be heard, amplified, and effect change.

By involving students as active respondents, and in some cases, students becoming researchers, opportunities not just for dialogue but also for collaboration to benefit them in their learning and growth (Mitra 2018) was made possible. These activities were part of an ongoing process, which how we view inclusion, but were also in alignment with principles of inclusion where students seen as 'hard to reach' in some ways, 'feel a sense of ownership' of initiatives that improve their learning (Sandoval and Messiou 2022, 786). In thinking about

the goal of inclusion, these activities were important in ensuring presence and participation of students with the aim of deciphering barriers to their learning (Ainscow 2007; Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006) in relation to each school's chosen topic. Engagement with these topics, through the student voice lens were aimed at identifying barriers for maximising learning opportunities, or making connections between children's learning in the present, and their potential futures.

We argue that student voice approaches can be characterised as dynamic, only if participatory activities are used alongside dialogues that then lead to changes in schools. Specifically, as we explored through our examples, teachers' demonstration of how they value students' voices through engaging in dialogue and implementing changes was crucial. Earlier studies that employed student as researcher initiatives implemented changes such as involving students on decision making on ICT purchases in a school (Davies 2011) or changing the school lunch menu (Mitra and Serriere 2012). Such studies and the implemented changes are important and valuable. However, our study is distinctive in two ways: Firstly, it has focused on issues of learning and teaching which are less frequently explored through student voice studies, addressing everyday students' concerns, such as time allocated on working on the carpet, or how teachers can be more explicit with their instructions to help students' better understanding in lessons. Secondly, another important insight in our study drawn from the experiences of the participating schools is that students are capable of exploring 'bigger ideas' (e.g., lesson planning, time management) which challenges the dominant and taken-for-granted discourse that pedagogy is not within the remit of pupils (Sandoval and Messiou 2022).

Another key theme that emerged when engaging with students' voices for inclusion is the role of adults. This figures in certain mindsets, attitudes, and behaviour that are crucial in creating opportunities for students' voice to emerge and further, in effecting change. The initial

17

attitude of some teachers was that of 'cynicism' because of their previous experience of how student voice initiatives were tokenistic and trivial. Some also expressed feelings of uncertainty. However, these attitudes changed in due course especially when they saw and realised that the activities being implemented, enabled greater student inclusion, and led them rethinking their own practices. As one of the teachers explained, the process made them think in more detail about the structure of their lessons. This suggests that engaging with students' voices allow for what Messiou and Ainscow (2020, 671) call as 'interruptions' that 'stimulate self-questioning, creativity and action'.

There are also important dispositions of teachers that enable engagement with students' voices. Not only was a collaborative disposition considered important, but a key element of it was being iterative, ongoing, and dynamic. As one teacher put it, it was a 'joint exploration' and 'naturally evolving'. By working jointly to conduct research, and in seeking changes in students' learning experiences, students and teachers were operating in a relationship of collaboration (Mitra 2018). Aside from being iterative, this collaborative relationship was coupled with an encouraging environment where learners were assured that their ideas were brilliant. This suggests an explicit deviation from a 'constrained' structure of classroom relationship (Thompson 2009) because in this case, school authorities are providing the assurance that students' perspectives are in fact valued and considered in making decisions. However, we argue that the best form of positive reinforcement is ensuring that changes emerging from engaging with students' voices are implemented and ensuring that such actions are clearly communicated to students.

Despite the evident attitude of openness and collaborative dispositions, teachers themselves have realised that one challenge is operating through adult mindsets especially in their expectation of student researchers' execution of the activity. As some of them mentioned, 'it's quite hard to take that back seat' because the default proclivity as one teacher described was

being '…basically just control freaks'. This implies that despite explicit efforts and demonstration of a collaborative disposition, it remains challenging to fully abandon 'managerial' dispositions (Thompson 2009). When teachers are unaware or unable to check these dispositions and attitudes, there is a danger of potentially alienating students, or turning well-meaning initiatives for inclusion into tokenistic ones. Slee (2011, 110) argues that "Injustice and exclusion are constructed and sustained by the choices of powerful people". In schools, teachers are in powerful positions and their choices are significant for promoting or hindering inclusion. On the other hand, even though teachers themselves were critical of their own behaviours, it can be argued that their interventions can help students become more critical and develop certain questioning skills whilst they are developing their roles as researchers.

Conclusion

We argued at the outset that there exists a gap between the rhetoric and practice of inclusion in schools. This study was an attempt to address this gap. This was achieved through greater student involvement, that led to dialogues between children and teachers which then led to specific actions, such as the refinement of teaching practices for the benefit of all children. Whilst decision making in schools remains largely in the hands of adults, we highlight how more collaborative forms of working between teachers and students can facilitate efforts towards inclusion. At the same time, the study adds to the limited body of student voice research in primary schools, compared to such research in secondary schools. It also highlights the ability of children of primary school age to work collaboratively with teachers for developing inclusive practices, by throwing a different light in relation to areas of

practice. Through ongoing dialogues between students and teachers a reconsideration of efforts to become more inclusive in schools can be achieved.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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