Using primary school children's voices to promote inclusive education

Contar con las voces del alumnado de primaria para promover la educación inclusiva

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Abstract: This paper argues for the need to engage with the views of children in primary schools as a way of promoting inclusive education. One example from one primary school, where the views of children were explored in order to develop further the school's practices, will be used to illustrate this argument. Methodological considerations, the benefits as well as the challenges associated with the process will be discussed.

Key words: children's voices, primary schools, inclusive education

Resumen: Este artículo aboga por la necesidad de comprometerse con los puntos de vista de los niños en las escuelas primarias como una forma de promover la educación inclusiva. Un ejemplo de una escuela primaria, donde se exploraron las opiniones de los niños para desarrollar aún más las prácticas de la escuela, se utilizará para ilustrar este argumento. Se discutirán las consideraciones metodológicas, los beneficios y los desafíos asociados con el proceso.

Palabras clave: voces del alumnado, escuelas primarias, educación inclusiva.

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Introduction

"Write a letter to Santa Claus saying what you would like to get for Christmas and saying why you think you deserve to get it"

As a primary school teacher many years ago, this was one of the activities that I used to do every single year before Christmas time. There is certainly nothing extraordinary about this, nor it is an unusual kind of activity; on the contrary, I would say it is a very common one. What I remember though, was me always being anxious to go at home and read these letters, knowing that I would find in them some interesting information that I did not know before. Of course, some letters were only asking for particular presents, whereas others revealed children's thoughts that did not come to the surface in any other way. Now, I wished I had kept some of these letters so that I could go back to them from time to time. However, I certainly remember asking myself: What is it that makes children talk honestly to Santa Claus? What is it that makes them say things that they would probably never say under other circumstances? Of course, this certainly has to do with all the stereotypical ideas that exist about Santa Claus, and the myth around his existence. However, I was amazed that even the children who knew that there was no Santa Claus, most of the times having being informed by an elder sibling, still expressed their wishes in their letters, and I dare to say not only because they were asked to! So the question remains: what was it that made these children being so open in these letters?

Through the years, having gone through a lot of changes in my thinking and in my professional career, having used a lot of communicative approaches in my teaching, I think I have realised that, maybe it was not Santa Claus himself that caused children's openness. It was rather the idea that someone would listen to them attentively with the aim being that of fulfilling their requests. Ever since I came to this understanding, I have tried as much as possible to listen to children at school in as many possible ways. In the same sense, this is what I aimed to do through my research over the last twenty years: to listen to children.

Listening to students' voices is closely relates to notions of inclusion since theories of inclusion support the idea of valuing all members' views. According to Barton (1997) inclusive education is about listening to unfamiliar voices, being open and empowering all members. It seems that the most unfamiliar voices in the field of inclusive education were the voices of students, even though the issue of listening to students' voices in relation to inclusive education has been gaining ground over the last years (e.g. Ainscow et al., 1999; Allan, 1999; Penrose et al., 2001; Rose and Shevlin, 2004; Vlachou, 1997). Roaf (2002) argues that researching children's views in relation to inclusive education has great potential in terms of improving children's experience of education on the one hand and teachers' understanding of their pupils on the other hand. The purpose of this paper is to explore how students' views in primary schools can help us understand barriers to participation and learning, and how these can be addressed, in order to facilitate efforts towards the development of inclusive schools.

Understanding inclusive education

The term 'inclusive education' has gained grounds internationally since the United Nations Salamanca Statement (1994). This was signed by 92 member countries and argued for schools with an inclusive orientation as being "the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all". Since then, a variety of definitions have been used by different authors.

Ainscow et al. (2006) suggest that inclusion is concerned with all children and young people in schools; it is focused on "presence, participation and achievement"(p.25). They also argue that inclusion is an ongoing process where the focus should be on identifying contextual barriers to learning and participation of all children. These ideas relate to Clark et al.'s (1995) 'organisational paradigm' of inquiry, which highlights the need to focus on identifying features within schools that facilitate responses to diversity. Students' views on their experiences of education can be seen as a way of understanding existing practices and further developing inclusive practices in schools. As I have argued elsewhere, engaging with the views of students in schools is a manifestation of being inclusive (Messiou, 2006).

Engaging with primary children's views in schools

The concept of voice can have varied meanings, including verbal and non-verbal ways of expressing views, through to active participation in decision-making, and can take different forms. The students' voices movement has gained considerable attention since the UN Convention on the Rights of Children (1989), which stated children's right to be heard through Articles 12 and 13. Since then, a significant number of countries, including the UK, have ratified the Convention, with governments required to demonstrate how they implement the Convention's principles.

The importance of listening to the views of children has also been highlighted in a number of policy documents in England, such as Every Child Matters (2004), 'Working together: listening to the voices of children and young people' (2008), and most recently in the statutory guidance 'Listening to and involving children and young people' (2014). Robinson (2014), in an updated report for the Cambridge Primary Review, looked at research literature published since 2007, focusing on studies carried out in the UK aiming at eliciting pupils' perspectives of their primary school experiences. She concludes by arguing that between the publication of the first report in 2007 and 2014 none of the studies has built on the findings of the original report, and, therefore, the need for more research that focuses on children's experiences of primary schooling is reinforced. In addition, an important methodological issue is highlighted: most work used surveys, with few studies involving interviews. Therefore, it seems that the need for more engaging methodologies to capture the views of children about their schooling requires further exploration. Finally, one of the suggestions for future research in Robinson's report is "the ways in which primary pupils and teachers can work together to co-produce and co-research teaching and learning within schools." (p. 24). Therefore, there is a need for more research to focus on the methodological ways of

engaging with the views of children in primary schools, especially about issues of learning and teaching.

The example that follows aims to illustrate how an engagement with children's voices in primary schools can facilitate the development of inclusive practices, and more specifically to address the following questions:

- How can we engage with children's voices in primary schools?

- What are the benefits when engaging with children's views in schools?

- Are there any challenges involved in such processes?

The project

The project took place in a primary school with 210 students and fourteen members of teaching staff. I was invited to give a presentation at the school and following this the school used a framework that facilitates an engagement with the views of students in schools. The whole school used the framework it with minimum input from me as a researcher. The framework (Figure 1, Messiou 2012) involves four steps and was developed with the focus being on addressing marginalisation in schools through an engagement with the views of students. However, it can be used more flexibly to explore the views of students in schools. The framework can be used in schools by researchers, practitioners or by students who take the role of co-researchers.
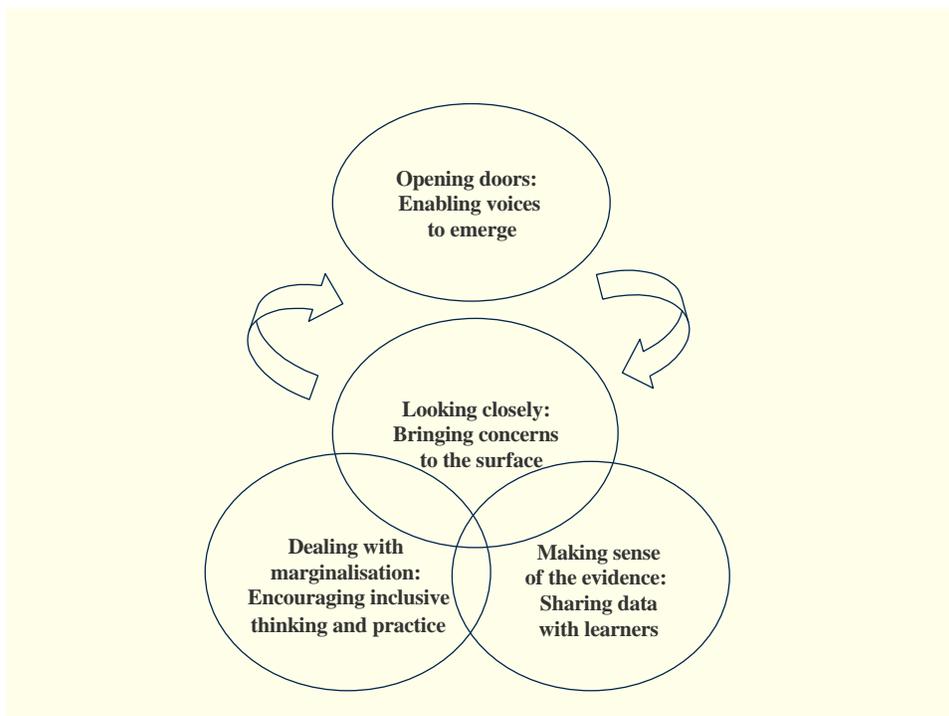
Figure 1: A framework for promoting inclusion

In the particular school, the focus was on understanding how children felt about their school and what they do in school, so that the teachers could learn from children and see how they could make changes in order to improve their experience.   In this sense, even though the framework is particularly concerned with marginalisation, it can be used as a way of evaluating students' experiences in the school in a broader sense. This was what the particular school decided to do. The actual processes used in the school involved the four steps, as follows:

Step 1: Opening doors: enabling voices to emerge

One of the challenges associated with engaging with the views of primary school children is the use of appropriate methods. For example, interviewing adults or young people might be seen as more straightforward compared to carrying out research with younger children (Adderley et al, 2015).   However, a number of techniques have been used with primary school children and have been found to be successful, such as the ones described below.

The school decided to dedicate a one-week period when all teachers would be engaged with data collection through the use of specific methods. These included message in a bottle, the communication box, sociograms, visual images and observations. Each teacher used some of the data collection methods at a time within the week that he/she felt it was most appropriate. In this way, they were able to incorporate the activities into their daily plans.

Message in a bottle

All of the teachers chose to use the 'message in a bottle' technique - adapted from Davies (2000), where students are asked to write down a message saying what they would like to change at school, if they could change one thing. The teachers used the technique with their whole classes, where the students were given pieces of paper with prompts to write their messages. They were given the option to write these messages either anonymously or not. As a follow-up activity, the teachers also used the communication box activity. This involved a box that was placed in a central point of the school where students could post their letters/messages, if they wanted to express a view in that way. Again, the school gave the students the choice of posting these messages anonymously or not. It was explained to the students that they could post their messages as and when they felt like doing this. Though there was one-week limit to post these messages – since the practitioners wanted to gather all the information and analyse it – in fact, the box remained in the school until the end of the school year.

Sociometric measures

The other activity that was used involved the use of sociometric measures. This is a well-established research technique which explores relationships among members of a group (Moreno, 1934; Wasserman and Faust, 1994). Students were told at the beginning of this activity that teachers wanted to find out what children's preferences were, in order to use them for future seating plans and organisation of groups for activities in the school. So the

students were asked to write down on a piece of paper the names of three children they would like to work with in the class, and three they would like to play with. It was made clear to the students that they would not have to share their nominations with anyone else.

Photo voice

Some of the teachers also used visual images approaches, more specifically the idea of photo voice, which involves students in taking photographs and explaining their significance (Wang *et al*., 1998). In particular, the teachers wanted to explore learning aspects within the school. With this in mind, they asked students to take pictures within their classrooms that showed what helps them with their learning and what makes it difficult for them. Students were put into groups of four and were given a camera for a whole day. So, for example, one group of students took a picture showing that what helps them is the use of real objects for solving maths problems. Then each group had to prepare posters with these pictures and write captions demonstrating what they felt about what was happening in the class.

Step 2: Looking closely: bringing concerns to the surface

Once the data were collected each teacher examined them, on their own in the first place. So, for example, for the sociometric measures, each practitioner transferred students' preferences onto a table and highlighted those students who were not chosen by anyone. The practitioners explained that filling in these tables with students' nominations brought some surprises for them since the students' nominations were not what they were expecting.

The messages in a bottle, as well as the messages posted in the communication box, were all gathered together and typed up by the headteacher. The reason for typing up the comments was to ensure complete anonymity of the students when their comments were shared with the staff during the next step. In addition, though some students were identifying themselves by providing their full names, and others were only identifying the class they belonged to, the headteacher decided not to use this information at all. The reason for doing this, she explained, was to avoid having teachers focusing only on what students from their class had said. In other words, she felt that students' comments should be shared with everyone in order to make them think about what was happening in the school in general. The headteacher then examined all the messages and picked out those that she thought to be of particular concern, or interesting for further discussion with the teachers. Some of the messages she identified for further consideration were:

"We would like to do more work in our groups (rather than working individually)."

"Some teachers come late to class and we waste time from our lessons."

"I want, and I want it so much, to be a member of the School Council."

"I want to have friends to play with."

The headteacher explained that deciding on which messages to be shared with the rest of the staff, and, indeed, with students at a later stage, was not a straightforward process, especially when the students were referring to individual students by name or to teachers. She did delete all names to avoid identifying any individuals.

Finally, the students who took photographs were asked to use them to design posters that conveyed their thoughts. One of the teachers put these on display in the classroom for the other students to look at. In addition, she organised another session at which further discussions took place with a particular focus on the issues that were emerging through the photographs.

Once again all the posters – as well as the key points that were identified through these discussions – were gathered together in order that they could be shared with other teachers. This material, the information from the sociometric measures and the selected messages from the communication box and the message in a bottle were eventually discussed at a staff meeting. Later some of this material was also shared with the students as part of the next step.

Step 3: Making sense of the evidence: sharing data with learners

Though the framework is presented in the form of separate steps, these are at the same time overlapping. Whereas the previous step focuses on identifying areas of concerns, or identifying individuals who might experience marginalisation within a school context, this third step focuses more on looking at the details and understanding the complexities of the data through a more collaborative process. The potential of this step is that it engages with multiple voices and, therefore, allows for and stimulates further reflection on everyone's part.

As I have explained, in the particular school the data and information were shared with members of staff during a staff meeting. Three sources of data were debated: the key points from the posters and the posters themselves; the tables summarising the sociometric data; and selected items from the message in a bottle and the communication box activities. In this way, the teachers were in a position to discuss their initial understandings, as well as to see what their colleagues brought to the table.

During an interview, the headteacher told me that the discussions that evolved during the staff meeting were really interesting. In particular, all the teachers were clearly very interested in looking at what the information meant and, in so doing, discussing possible explanations for the students' views. She explained that the method that created most discussion was the sociometric measures. What was significant in this particular context, being a relatively small school, was that the teachers knew most of the children in the various classes. Therefore, they could all relate to the information about the students' preferences. Consequently, they were in a position, to some extent at least, to discuss individual students and the nominations they received. Specifically, the teachers were surprised at how many students were not chosen by anyone, neither to play with nor to work with.

I discussed the validity of this particular method elsewhere (Messiou, 2002). In particular, I highlighted through research that the results from the sociometric measures should not be taken at face value in the sense that children's views may change rapidly, even within a single

day. However, what was very interesting was that the evidence clearly provoked discussion and reflection amongst the staff. In particular, it directed their attention to individual students who possibly had not been of any concern to them before. The discussions led the teachers to decide that they wanted to find out more about particular students. At the same time, they wanted to explore whether the information gained from the sociograms was a true reflection of what was happening in the school with regard to particular individuals. Initially, they wanted to focus on all those students who got either no nominations or only one nomination. This meant focusing on a relatively large number of students, which would make the collection of more data difficult and time-consuming.

In consultation with me, the staff finally decided to focus only on those students who have not received any nominations – a total of nineteen students – which made it more manageable. As a result of their discussions, they decided to shadow these individuals during break times to find out if they truly had no one to play with. In particular, they developed what they called a single diary of observations for the group of students. This had a page for each student who was identified as having no nominations from his/her classmates. Whichever teacher was on duty outside in the playground, focused attention on one or two of these students. If they saw something of interest they would note it down in the notebook.

For some students, it emerged that there were no real issues since they were included in the games that the children were playing, whereas for others it emerged that what the sociograms revealed was confirmed. For example, it was found out that some of the individuals who were not nominated by anyone were seen to be mainly on their own during playtimes. The teachers explained to me that they noticed that, at times, some of these students were actively attempting to be included in games. Sometimes this led the teachers to intervene. The teachers remained vigilant, however, knowing the impact that a teacher's presence might have on students' behaviour. This led them to keep checking that the particular students had friends to play with at playtime.

Later, information gathered through the message in a bottle, the communication box and the visual images, as well as extracts from some observations, were shared with students within some of the classes. Here the aim was to stimulate wider debate within the school community and, in so doing, gain a better understanding of students' experiences. Of course, the more sensitive information gained through sociometric measures was not to be shared with the students.

One particular teacher did a session with her whole class in which she shared some of the messages that were of concern to her and some of the observation notes of playground interactions. Specifically, she divided the class into groups of four and asked them to look some of the messages in a bottle, as well as the following observation notes:

> *Many students from one class are playing a game. A girl, from the same class, is standing there looking at the other students. She tries to join at some point by asking one of her classmates. The other girl tells her that she cannot join. She approaches another student and the other student tells her the same. In the end, they ask her to be part of the game by being the observer letting them know if anyone breaks the rules. In other words, they invent a role for her but she is not really participating in the game. (Teacher's observation notes)*

Then students were asked to think about the following set of questions in relation to this incident:

- *How do you think this student feels?*

- *Do you think what has happened is fair?*

- *Has anyone been in a similar situation at school? Can you give us an example?*

- *What could be done so that such incidents are avoided?*

What is important here is that such observation notes stimulated discussions among both students and teachers. The teacher went on to explain that, during the class discussion, her students gave other examples in which students were marginalised in the school, both in the playground and in the class. Most importantly, she commented, this had led some of the students to think about their own behaviours and how these might be altered in order to address issues of marginalisation within the school.

Such processes are not always straightforward. For example, in this school when the headteacher read the letters from the students found out that there was a significant number of

children from a particular class who expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of homework that their teacher was giving them every day. The headteacher was surprised, since it was the school's policy not to give a lot of homework to the students, especially to the young children. These children were in a Year 3 class. The headteacher thought that since this was an issue that emerged only for a particular class, it would be quite sensitive to bring it up in a staff meeting in a way that would identify the particular member of staff. She therefore thought that it would be best to discuss this privately with the teacher. When she started the conversation about her giving the children a lot of homework, the teacher insisted that this was not the case. The headteacher told her that it seemed that this was the way that it was perceived by many of looked surprised and immediately asked if this was something that only students from her class expressed. The response was affirmative. The teacher then started saying that possibly the children who wrote this were the ones who were very slow and it took them longer to complete their homework, and that was why they perceived it as a lot, and not because in reality she asked them to do a lot. The headteacher tried to tell her that, if the children feel that way, we should try and find out why, and then see what we can do about it. Then the teacher asked who had raised the issue and the headteacher told her that some of the students did not identify themselves, but indicated their class. The teacher kept insisting on finding out who the children involved were. The headteacher (who had said to the students in advance that what they were going to say would be shared with their teachers; therefore, it was up to them whether they were going to identify themselves or not) then gave her the name of a boy – who in fact, was perceived as being an excellent student and who identified himself in the letter. The teacher immediately said: 'Steve is talking nonsense! He is the best

student in the class and it takes him five minutes to do his work. He is talking nonsense!' The headteacher then became defensive as well and told her 'You know that this student would not make up things. There must be something there. If this student feels this way, there must be something there.' She also kept reminding her that there were others who expressed the same concern. The teacher kept resisting this idea, saying that she did not know where it came from.

Following this conversation, the headteacher decided to explore this further by talking to the individual student. So she said to the boy that she had read his letter and wanted to find out more. She asked him how many lessons his teacher asked them to do for their homework and how long it took him to complete it. In the discussion that followed it emerged that what he had meant was that the science teacher was giving them lots of homework, not the class teacher, and he gave the headteacher details to justify why he thought it was a lot.

After this discussion the headteacher again talked to the class teacher, who was relieved to hear that the boy meant not her but another teacher. In a way she felt that she was right and that the boy was wrong. However, as the headteacher pointed out to her, the boy was not wrong; he had something in mind but he did not express it correctly on paper and that is why it was necessary to explore the issue further to find out what he really meant. Furthermore, there were others who expressed the same view from the particular class, but did not identify

themselves, so the teachers could not be certain what they were referring to.

Step 4: Dealing with marginalisation: encouraging inclusive thinking and practice

This final step of the framework, as with the previous two steps, should be seen as overlapping and interconnected with what previously occurred. For example, when the teacher shared the information with the children in her class and asked them to find ways so that nobody feels left out, this was definitely planting the seeds of inclusive thinking in their minds. Of course, suggestions may be far from reality and the challenge is to turn intentions into changes in behaviour.

The key factor, therefore, is to make sure that suggestions move beyond rhetoric and are turned into action. That is why the close monitoring of what is actually happening in schools, by teachers and in collaboration with students, is so essential. A number of actions were taken in this particular school as a result of the engagement with the framework. Some of the changes were at a general level, in respect to school policy and practices, whereas some of the changes were at the individual level, in terms of both teachers and students. So, as I have mentioned, a number of students were expressing concerns about the fact that they did not have friends to play with. What the staff decided to do was to work with the school council in order to address this issue. The council members, each being representatives of their classes, came up with the idea that individual students should take on the role of friendship facilitators during playtime. Their task would be to make sure that those children who did not have anyone to play with could find some friends and join in some games. The school council decided that they would ask for volunteers to take on this role and that it would be very important that all the students should be made aware about the role of these individuals.

Furthermore, in order that these students would be easily identified by other students in the playground, they came up with the idea that they should wear a colourful band on their arm. As the teachers explained, this system worked well and it was noticeable how children felt more comfortable approaching the student facilitators and asking for their help to find friends, rather than telling the teachers. However, it has to be noted that this does not mean that all problems were addressed through this approach; the teachers continued to observe the individual students that they had targeted through the use of sociometric measures. Some of them, as they found out, managed to create friendships through the facilitators, and, therefore, became more included during playtimes; whereas other attempts were not deemed to be successful. On those occasions, the teachers felt that they had to intervene at a more individual level.

Another issue that emerged through the use of the framework related to the use of group work, in particular, that students wanted to work more in groups. This was seen by the teachers as a way of addressing marginalisation of some individual students during lessons. However, as the headteacher explained, it emerged through the discussions in the staff meeting that her colleagues had differing views regarding what group work means, and, most importantly, how it can be put into practice in such a way so as to make sure that all children participate effectively. Therefore, the head organised a staff development session about cooperative learning and group work, to make sure that the teachers were clear about how they could put this into practice with a particular focus on making sure that every student was actively participating. For example, it emerged that some teachers thought that group work simply meant having students sitting in groups, just asking them to discuss as a group and agree on a common answer. They were not aware, for example, of the different roles that members of the group can take and the importance of the common task for the group (Baloche, 1998; Cohen *et al*., 1999; Fuchs *et al*., 2000; Johnson *et al*., 1993; Kagan, 1992). By learning about the principles behind cooperative learning, as well as the practical issues associated with using it, the teachers were in a position to allow individual students to participate in the learning process in a way that had not been achieved before.

Benefits and challenges

It can be argued that the use of the framework enabled these teachers - and to some extent students - to think more critically in regards to what is happening in their school and what particular individuals are experiencing. By engaging with the views of students, teachers and students stopped and reflected on what was emerging from the data. Furthermore, they stopped and thought about *why* some students were expressing specific views and, most importantly, *how* they could address some of the issues that were brought to the surface. In this sense, the process created an 'interruption' of the sort described by Ainscow and colleagues (2006) and, in so doing, threw light on overlooked possibilities for involving students who were previously being marginalised. Collaboration in terms of analysing information was crucial to this process in order that, through the use of the framework, reflective analysis can be achieved. In other words, the framework aims to assist participants in moving beyond existing perceptions and understandings. Through the use of this framework teachers became more attentive towards individual students and, in a way, towards what was happening in the playground in a more general sense. Changes in thinking

and attitudes are difficult to measure, however, changes in behaviours can be observed. As the headteacher explained, she had noted a change in most of the teachers' behaviours, which, she believed, had resulted from their use of the framework and the discussions that it provoked.

At the same time, such processes can be challenging as we have seen in one of the examples above. This issue of teachers trying to defend their actions, or even denying what children believe to be the truth, has been discussed by other researchers in similar kind of studies (e.g. Ainscow and Kaplan 2005). Truly listening to what children are saying requires moving away from tokenistic views of engaging with children's voices. It means trusting what children have to say. It also means being prepared to question what we do and what we believe is correct. This proves to be quite a challenge in many cases.

However, through such processes the empowerment of students is facilitated. As this occurs, it is likely that the school itself is transformed. As Fielding (2004) argues:

> Transformation requires a rupture of the ordinary and this demands as much of teachers as it does of students. Indeed, it requires a transformation of what it means to be a student; what it means to be a teacher. In effect, it requires the intermingling and interdependence of both.

> (p. 296)

As we have seen, the use of the framework employs collaborative structures, in which practitioners and students share information and, through engaging in dialogues, arrive at collective solutions for confronting marginalisation. In these ways, a greater interdependence between students is reinforced, as well as interdependence amongst students and adults. Where this occurs we see progress towards what others have defined as an inclusive culture (Dyson *et al*., 2004).

Concluding thoughts

Ballard (1999) argues:

> We cannot be certain about what inclusive education is at this, or perhaps any later time. We can engage with people and ideas to work on what it might be, reducing barriers to participation and learning as we go. (p.176)

What I have tried to argue through this paper is that children's voices can be a way of helping us understand what these barriers to participation and learning are and how these can be addressed. In this way they can facilitate moves towards inclusive education. At the same time, the issue of listening to children, and even deeper than this, the general discourses on

student involvement, are related to six interconnected strands as these are described by Lodge (2005): changing views of childhood, human rights, democratic schools, citizenship education through participation, consumerism and a concern for school improvement.

The importance of listening to learners in educational contexts has, of course, been argued by many authors (e.g. Ainscow *et al*., 1999; Allan, 1999; Allan, 2010; Carrington *et al*., 2010; Fielding, 2001; Mahbub, 2008; Rudduck and Flutter, 2000). However, my argument takes these ideas a little further in that I am suggesting that listening to children in relation to inclusion is, in itself, a manifestation of being inclusive. More specifically, I suggest that, if we accept the argument that inclusion is about identifying and addressing barriers to learning and participation, an engagement with students' voices becomes essential. At the end of the day, those who experience either inclusive or exclusive practices are the students themselves. They are, therefore, in a better position than anyone else to explain what it feels like to be a learner in a given context. It could be argued then that engaging with students' voices in an authentic way can be viewed as a potentially powerful approach to inclusive education.

Note: The example used in this paper is adapted from Chapter 2 of the book: Messiou, K. (2012) *Confronting marginalisation in education: A framework for promoting inclusion*. London: Routledge.

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