The Importance of Children and Young People's Voices in Debates on Inclusive Education

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Abstract

This chapter argues that research, debates and policy on inclusive education cannot be well informed, and successful inclusive practices implemented, without prioritising the voices of children and young people. There are barriers and tensions arising in achieving this especially in secondary school level teaching. Nevertheless, there are examples of how these may be overcome. Recent studies show that there are methods and practices which can work although further research is needed to explore this under researched area in more depth. Placing the voices of children and young people into the context of other key stakeholders is also examined as this can enable a comparison on differences and commonalities, leading to dialogue and more successful change.

17.1 Introduction

The term inclusive education has not had a universally accepted definition since it first appeared in the 1980s (Nilholm and Goransson 2017). Messiou (2017) suggested that there are six main interpretations of inclusive education:

- Including children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in mainstream education
- Children and young people excluded for disciplinary reasons
- Including all children and young people vulnerable to exclusion
- School for all children and young people
- Education for all children and young people
- An overarching principled approach to education and society.

In the United Kingdom, the definition has historically been entwined with SEND and it is argued that this is still the case (Florian 2019; Symeonidou and Mavrou 2019). However, globally there is a move towards considering inclusion as education for all (UNESCO 2020a). This is not particularly new to many but being clearer that 'inclusive education is good education' (Richler 2012, p. 177) and coming from an international organization with reach and gravitas, such as UNESCO, it is a strong statement. There are additional definitions and concepts within inclusive education which could also be discussed but what is of significance, is that inclusive education can be, and is, viewed in multiple ways (Anderson et al. 2014; Dimitrellou et al. 2018).

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A reason for this could be that inclusive education is a socially constructed concept (Florian 2019). Therefore, it is subject to values, cultural interpretations and political preferences. Inclusive education is not a neutral concept but laden with social judgement (Goodall 2018). This leads to different opinions on what the term means, what the focus should be, and how best to implement practices. Nicaise (2012) suggested that this disagreement is not just confined to inclusive education but includes fundamental discussions on equality objectives, the underpinning of inclusivity itself. There are contradictions and ambiguities within the Salamanca Statement (the key catalyst to international inclusive education), the conventions which followed, and policy, which further add to the confusion over what inclusive education is and how to define it (Ainscow et al. 2019; Messiou 2019).

The divergent nature of the term inclusive education causes confusion over how best to adopt inclusive practices, how to measure their success, and how to improve the experiences of the stakeholders involved. Different stakeholders within inclusive education will have different priorities, and this will in turn impact their views and actions (Messiou 2017; Goodall 2018). These stakeholders include policymakers, teachers, parents, and the children and young people who are the focus of inclusive education themselves.

17.1.1 Children and Young People's Perspectives

A significant amount of focus in inclusive education research, and decision making, negates the experiences and opinions of children and young people (Messiou 2019). The opinions and perspectives of 'experts' are favoured over those of children (Veck and Hall 2018). This translates to the facet of a child or young person's experiences of inclusive education being missed from research and knowledge gathering on the topic. There are limited numbers of studies that incorporate the words of children or young people without a professional's narrative running through them (Goodall 2018).

This is despite the UNCRC stating how children have the right to be heard and should be listened to on issues and decisions impacting them (Rose and Shevlin 2017). This right is often summarised by the word 'voice'. By giving children and young people a voice, the opportunity for them to articulate their experiences, opinions, needs and desires is promoted to encourage adults to not only hear these but listen and act upon them. It is important to highlight that the term voice is normally used but in actual fact 'voices' would be a more appropriate term as children and young people are not one homogenous group. They will have different experiences and views to each other, and these can and will change (Messiou et al. 2020).

This commitment to listen to the voices of children and young people is absent from the Salamanca Statement, and as a significant portion of national policy is based on the themes and intentions of the Salamanca Statement, this could be an explanation as to why it is also absent from policy (Messiou 2019). A more recent revisiting of the Salamanca Statement by UNESCO (2020b) did not include specific consideration of the voices of children or young people but in the six actions that were recommended it would be remiss of subsequent report authors not to specifically included young people in the further development of inclusive education. It was not until 2014 that United Kingdom's legislation fully embraced voice with the passing of the Children and Families Act 2014 (Harris and Davidge 2019). Within this Act, it was written that children and young people should have an active role in decisions concerning them. This would enable them to have a voice and greater autonomy over their lives. However, as Harris and Davidge (2019) discovered there is little evidence confirming this is the case. It appears that children and young people's voices are only really considered when discussing decisions directly impacting individuals, such as writing an educational, health and care plan, and that this consideration is limited by a continued focus on the views and wishes of parents or carers. This is

exacerbated when the child or young person has additional support needs (Byrne 2019; Dimitrellou and Male 2020). Therefore, voices are missing from wider debates, knowledge gathering and policy making.

Messiou et al. (2020) suggested that even when children and young people's voices are sought this is only adopted in a tokenistic manner, through collaboration rather than full participation, leading to very little actual impact on decision making. There are assumptions that children and young people are unable to understand and communicate their experiences, opinions and suggestions for change (Harris and Davidge 2019). There are underlying assumptions on age, maturity and levels of cognitive ability (this is even more so the case if a child or young person has the label of SEND) (Messiou 2019). However, Norwich and Koutsouris (2017) provide an alternative stance on this. In addition to voice, the UNCRC also emphasises the importance of protecting children and young people, parental guidance and acting in the best interests of the child (UNICEF 2020). Therefore, this can provide a dilemma when trying to promote the voices of children and young people as tensions could arise when these elements conflict with each other. It is a difficult decision which to prioritise, and harsh compromises may have to be made (Norwich and Koutsouris 2017).

In addition to these theoretical and assumption based challenges, it could be suggested that the practical gathering of a child or young person's perspective is a particularly ambitious endeavour. Some children can be malleable to suggestion and offer answers which they think adults want to hear (Veck and Hall 2018). This can be exacerbated when culture and location influence the way in which children and young people's roles are viewed (Fay 2018). There are often greater power imbalances between adults and children, and language and ability can cause barriers especially in the field of SEND (Norwich and Kelly 2004). Even if a child can successfully articulate their opinions and experiences, it can be difficult for an adult to interpret these correctly (Florian and Beaton 2018); their narratives are viewed through the adult lens (Rose and Shevlin 2017). Exclusivity can also occur with participants being selected due to their willingness, abilities or experiences, or by the requirements of the research itself, such as the methods adopted and time commitments (Veck and Hall 2018). Thus, only the confident and most articulate children and young people are often considered (Dimitrellou and Male 2020). This then silences the children and young people who may be most at risk of being excluded in education, and society, from knowledge gathering on the topic (Byrne 2019).

Nonetheless, research has shown that children and young people are capable of knowing their life worlds and being able to express their thoughts and feelings on this, as well as make constructive suggestions on how to improve practice and contribute to reform (Allan 2006; Dimitrellou and Male 2020). Goodall (2018) states that even if it challenges theories and notions, promoting the voices of children in the study of inclusive education is a positive approach. Individuals are in the best position to be able to communicate their experiences and this will contribute to a greater understanding of what these are (Rose and Shevlin 2017). By listening to the voices of children and young people, the 'experts' will discover a different perspective, thereby expanding their knowledge and enabling change (Veck and Hall 2018). Therefore, it is important to tackle assumptions and challenges to enable a multiplicity of voices to be heard and acted upon (Messiou 2019; Ainscow 2020).

Despite voices of children and young people being a gap in the literature, there is an increased interest in listening to hidden voices especially those of children and young people, and particularly when they have a label of SEND. There are some researchers who have endeavoured to listen to the voices of children and/or young people in their research on inclusive education in recent studies. Goodall (2018) is a case in point.

Goodall (2018) conducted a study which did focus on listening to the voices of young people. Twelve students with Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASC) at a mainstream secondary school in Northern Ireland took part in a qualitative

participatory study exploring their conceptualisations of inclusion. The study found that the young people thought of inclusion as being feelings of belonging, value, fairness and support rather than placement in mainstream. These findings challenge some of the key literature on inclusive education where definition is often related to placement (Goodall 2018). This is an illustration of where the experiences of young people do not match the opinions of 'experts' and thus demonstrates why it is important to listen to young people and build this into decisions about inclusive environments.

Boström and Broberg (2018) also conducted a study with the aim of listening to the voices of young people. They used questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with ten students with intellectual disabilities at a special school in Sweden. They concluded that the participants experienced inclusivity both at school and at home but that this could be both protective and restrictive. The study also found that wellbeing was high, and the students experienced positive mental health. Boström and Broberg (2018) highlight how it is difficult to compare these results to results in other literature as the views of young people with intellectual disabilities are absent. However, they could draw on research with parents and note that there were differences between the perceptions of parents and the perceptions of young people with intellectual disabilities. This again illustrates how valuable it is to gather the views of children and young people as they can differ from those of adults, 'experts' or otherwise.

Goodall (2018) and Boström and Broberg (2018) both highlight how the voices and views of young people with SEND can be gathered in research. However, both of these studies focused on a very small sample size and a specific category of SEND. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that the results reflect the experiences of children and young people elsewhere or who fit into other SEND categories, not that this was the aim or claim of either study.

However, what is of significance is that they both highlight the importance of studying the views and experiences of young people as these might be different from those of 'experts' and other stakeholders. Both of these studies recommend that young people are listened to more closely and more frequently. This view is supported by many others with calls to invite children and young people to enact, and to prioritise, the telling of their narratives (Rose and Shevlin 2017; Veck and Hall 2018; Messiou 2019; Messiou et al. 2020; Ainscow 2020).

17.1.2 Other Stakeholders

As previously discussed, seeking the voices of children and young people is vital in understanding inclusive education. However, it is also important to include all stakeholders in research, debate and decision making. Drawing on the experiences, knowledge and expertise of all these groups allows a more comprehensive and accurate insight (Roberts and Simpson 2016; Ainscow 2020). It can also elicit differences and commonalities between, and within, stakeholder groups. By identifying these, dialogue can occur causing a catalyst towards a consensus over what inclusion is, and what inclusive practices work (Ainscow 2020; Boyle et al. 2020). Nevertheless, it can be difficult to involve all stakeholders in research and discussions on inclusion due to being able to effectively offer suitable methods for all and the time commitments it would require.

Norwich (2017), Dimitrellou et al. (2018) and Sosnowy et al. (2018) have, however, conducted studies which sought to compare the experiences and views of children and young people with those of other stakeholders involved. These were primarily teachers but had the aim of drawing out the differences and commonalities.

Sosnowy et al. (2018) conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 participants with ASC to explore their experiences of friendship, having recently left high school. The study compared these with the perceptions of teachers and concluded that the young adults viewed the concept of friendship differently to how teachers viewed them. Thus, support provided at school might have been less effective in

meeting the needs of these participants. This study highlights where the perceptions and experiences of students and teachers differ, and how this might have a direct impact on the effectiveness of practice. Mayes et al. (2020) discuss the problems inherent in developing teachers' learning based on evidence from the voice of students.

Similarly, Norwich (2017) found differences in the experiences and views of teachers, parents and students although not to such a significant degree. Norwich (2017) presented 12 case studies based on interviews with children and young people, their parents, and their teacher or teaching assistant. The participants fell into a wide range of SEND categories as well as being from primary, secondary, special and mainstream schools. The case studies were presented to offer a diverse view on the experiences of children and young people with SEND to inform practice. There are many insights presented which reflects the diversity of the participants and their experiences. However, a great number of the concluding remarks focus on the experiences of the parents and teachers rather than the children and young people. Nonetheless, the case studies do suggest that children and young people can have differing views to those of teachers and teaching assistants in terms of labelling and levels of independent learning. For further discussion on labelling in special and inclusive education see Boyle (2014), Lauchlan and Boyle (2007, 2020), and Arishi and Boyle (2017).

Dimitrellou et al. (2018) have a slightly different conclusion to those of the two studies above (that of Norwich, 2017; Sosnowy et al. 2018, respectively). They used a mixed methods approach across three mainstream secondary schools in England to assess their inclusivity. The study found that a participant's experiences within the school directly impacted their opinion of its level of inclusivity. Therefore, there were differences between the educational practitioners, educational psychologists and the students participating. However, these differences appeared to be about specific details and the three groups of participants all agreed which schools were the most and least inclusive. Dimitrellou et al. (2018) suggested that this finding is significant as commonalities could indicate that there are practices which are inclusive for all stakeholders. Thus, they call for more research into commonalities in order to confirm what these practices might be, as their study was small scale due to difficulties in recruiting participants.

There are a limited number of studies which aim to compare directly the experiences and views of children and young people with other stakeholders. Nevertheless, Norwich (2017), Dimitrellou et al. (2018) and Sosnowy et al. (2018) all suggested that there is significant value in seeking the experiences of both students and other stakeholders, as the differences and commonalities they share will inform practices and allow change.

Ainscow (2020) explored this idea from a point of practice in his current research. Eight secondary schools across three countries took part in action research where teachers collaborated with each other and students they deemed vulnerable, to plan lessons and evaluate their success. This study concluded that this collaboration, and dialogue, caused the teachers to rethink their teaching which led to more opportunities for their students to actively participate, as well as a change in the assumptions the teachers had made about student capabilities. This inclusive inquiry is currently being developed in 30 primary schools in five countries with greater emphasis on the ways in which teachers and students can create ongoing dialogue to inform everyday practices. This dialogue aims to interrupt the status quo to allow for questioning and creative action. By collaborating in this manner, these stakeholders can aim to develop a consensus on what inclusive practices look like which Ainscow (2020) hopes will filter through to a whole school approach. This dialogue allows for the ongoing promotion of the voices of children and young people. Nevertheless, this approach may prove too time consuming for every school to implement with potential reluctance from some students and teachers to participate. It is important to ensure that it is not just the most vocal stakeholders who are heard (Dunne et al. 2018). As Dimitrellou and Male

(2020) found, teachers may need significant training to allow them to effectively listen to the voices of children and young people, and children and young people have often found attempts to include voice in school programmes disappointing. These barriers contribute to the limited implementation of the views and suggestions of children and young people in practice.

17.1.3 Secondary Schooling

This limited promotion and implementation of voice is arguably exacerbated in secondary schooling where neoliberal and stratified systems are favoured. Norwich (2009) and Done and Andrews (2019) suggested that policies surrounding inclusive education at secondary school level are not necessarily supportive of inclusion and help to reinforce the conflict between achieving high academic standards and embedding inclusive practices. The complex nature of school systems, especially that of secondary schools, ensures that there are various levels of processes and/or soft (people) issues which have to be navigated. Anderson and Boyle (2014) considered the issues of inclusion in schools using an adapted model of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory. Policies reject heterogeneity by creating generic regulations and guidance which does not allow for individual settings to make decisions based on the needs of their stakeholders (Middleton 2019; Liu et al. 2020). This is echoed by the inequality of stratified educational systems where children are selected, graded and streamed by academic talent and achievement (Done & Andrews 2019). Ability grouping encourages assumptions over capabilities causing lower expectations from teachers and lower self-confidence of students (Mazenod et al. 2019; Middleton 2019). This accumulates into students and teachers being constrained in their choices and behaviours (Mazenod et al. 2019). Thus, a lack of promotion of voices and creative interruptions to pedagogy are experienced (Hauerwas and Mahon 2018).

Secondary schools in the United Kingdom are large and complex organisations which are encultured in this approach of measuring and assessing young people by their academic skills (Florian 2019). This can create tension with the inclusion of students with SEND, for example, as they can be viewed as lowering the achievement ranking of a school due to lower grades (Slee 2018). It is suggested that mainstream schools cannot cater for the needs of individual students (Norwich 2019), and individuals not only do they have to adapt but are responsible for their own trajectories (Done and Andrews 2019; Florian 2019). There becomes a tension between a neoliberal focus on competition and including the voices of young people (Black 2019). Tensions also emerge as settings try to balance the policy and assessment criteria they are presented with, with the values and beliefs surrounding inclusion. Compromises are often required, and the suggestions and views of stakeholders may be casualties of this trade off (Norwich and Koutsouris 2017). Despite the evident complexities, De Vroey et al. (2016) and Van Mieghem et al. (2018) stated in their meta-reviews, there is limited research into inclusive education in secondary schools (e.g., Boyle et al. 2013) with even less research promoting the voices of children and young people within this educational sector.

However, Opie, Deppler and Southcott (2017), Saggers (2015) and Lamb et al. (2016) have all adopted qualitative methods with the aim that this would enable an accurate representation of mainstream secondary school students' voices. Opie et al. (2017) achieved this by conducting in-depth interviews with students who have visual impairments in order to explore their experiences of their support provisions in mainstream secondary schools. They found that the students did not believe they were supported in a way which enabled inclusive education. The study concluded that the experience of these students was contrary to the legal requirements of mainstream schools.

Saggers (2015) also used in-depth interviews, in conjunction with semi-structured interviews, to explore the experiences of children. This study focused on young people with ASC in one school and found that overall their experiences were

positive but there were inhibitors. Saggers (2015) concluded that hearing about inhibitors through the voices of the young people themselves, provided invaluable knowledge, as specifics could be identified and these could inform practice. This study illustrates the importance and benefit of hearing the voices of young people in inclusive education.

Both of the above studies were conducted in Australia, and while there are parallels between Australia and the United Kingdom there are also differences and therefore, these studies may not be representative of the United Kingdom's picture. However, Lamb et al. (2016) did conduct a study in the United Kingdom exploring inclusive education in secondary schools. They adopted a photo-elicitation method and asked students with ASC to photograph their experiences of physical education lessons; these were then used as prompts in unstructured interviews. They concluded that there were barriers to enjoyment and participation in physical education which could be addressed with relative ease in practice. This study concluded that the method of photography helped in empowering the students to show their own experiences leading to their voices being at the heart of the study.

What Opie et al. (2017), Saggers (2015) and Lamb et al. (2016) all have in common is that they advocated the utilisation of qualitative methods to enable a more accurate understanding and, therefore, a more accurate representation of the voices of their participants. This led to specific information being generated that could be used to inform practice. However, it could be argued that there is an overreliance on the method of interviewing to gather data in qualitative research. Opie et al. (2017) and Saggers' (2015) studies, as well as the studies discussed earlier by Norwich (2017), Sosnowy et al. (2018) and Boström and Broberg (2018), relied heavily on interviews to gather data. It has been suggested that interviews, especially semi-structured interviews, have become the default method for qualitative researchers and can be chosen without due consideration to their suitability (Potter and Hepburn 2012). Semi-structured interviews can be a very useful tool as they facilitate participants in telling their stories but with enough structure to keep focus on a study's research questions and aims (Robson 2015). However, the method of interviewing requires a certain level of verbal and cognitive ability from participants, as well as the confidence to articulate their experiences. Therefore, interviews can eliminate potential participants, thus, excluding their voices from the research (Williams et al. 2019). This is particularly important to consider when researching with children or young people, and when researching with people who may have additional needs such as SEND as they may be more likely to experience the barriers interviews present (Strack et al. 2004; Dell-Clark 2010; Call-Cummings et al. 2018). More creative, visual and participatory methods, such as the photo-elicitation method adopted by Lamb et al. (2016) and the mixed method approach by Goodall (2018), can make participation in studies more accessible to these groups (Kramer-Roy 2015; Call-Cummings et al. 2018).

Another arguable limitation of Opie et al (2017), Saggers (2015) and Lamb et al. (2016) studies is that they were all small in scale and cannot claim their findings to be a generalisation. However, none of them attempted to claim that they were. As with the majority of qualitative research (Crotty 1998), these studies appeared to follow the philosophical underpinnings of multiple and socially constructed realities, therefore, believing that the truth varies and changes. Findings are a snapshot of a certain group at a certain time and place which can add insight but cannot be assumed to be representative of the whole population (Atkinson 2017). As such all of the studies recommended further research into the experiences of children and young people with SEND and inclusive education.

Another commonality in which Opie et al. (2017), Saggers (2015) and Lamb et al. (2016) share is that their respective studies focus on one specific disability. Lamb et al. (2016) and Saggers (2015) both focussed on ASC, and Opie et al. (2017) focussed on visual impairments. None of them explored the cross section of students with and without SEND in a typical mainstream setting. Therefore, the voices of

potential participants have not been heard. It could be argued that consideration should be given to specific groups as young people are not a homogenous group (Oliver 2004; Done and Andrews 2019).

We cannot assume that young people at secondary school all share in the same experiences as identity and life worlds are multifaceted (Meerosha 2006; Messiou 2017). Students not only have needs which relate to a label they may have, such as SEND, but also those that all children and young people have, as well as those which are unique to them (Norwich 2009). There are some needs which will be easier to accommodate in a mainstream setting than others as there is such as wide range of requirements (Done and Andrews 2019). Labels can predetermine the treatment a student receives, and there is a risk that such a label comes with stigma and judgements which impact the learning and life chances of a child or young person (Florian 2019). Nevertheless, the removal of such a label is also a risk in itself as it could lead to the loss of support and protection (Norwich 2019). This dilemma of difference (Norwich 2009, 2019) is important to consider when researching and promoting the voices of stakeholders in inclusive education as it may well impact their experiences and views as well as the assumptions made by the researcher or person listening to their views. However, studies into inclusive education can be exclusive in their approach by restricting themselves to specific groups of students and therefore, not include all potential stakeholders who may want to have their voice heard (Veck and Hall 2018). This is an example of another tension which can exist in tying to elicit the voices of children and young people. The methodological or theoretical ideals of promoting the voices of children and young people can be difficult to implement in practice; tradeoffs may be needed (Norwich and Koutsouris 2017).

17.2 Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued that a significant barrier to the successful implementation of inclusivity is a lack of voice of the very people who will be required to experience the positives and/or the negatives of the environment. The experiences, views and suggestions of key stakeholders are limited in the debates and policy making surrounding inclusive education. This is especially the case for children and young people due to assumptions, the theorical challenges and practical barriers present. Nevertheless, children and young people are capable of knowing and expressing their experiences and views to the extent where reform can be achieved. Their voices can add insight into what barriers they face as well as what works. Viewing these voices in conjunction with other stakeholders is a valuable exercise where differences and commonalities can act as a catalyst for dialogue and change. There are methods in which this appears to be achievable but not without tensions and dilemmas emerging. Secondary level schooling may have even more of these tensions and challenges due to a continued focus on market competition brought on by incessant surge of neoliberalism in the public education sector. However, this should not deter the objective of promoting voices as this empowers agency and collaboration which is imperative in the strive towards creating inclusive schools.

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