

Chapter 10. Students' voices and inclusive education for a democratic education

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This chapter argues for the need to engage with students' voices in schools to promote inclusive and democratic learning contexts. The chapter introduces theories of inclusive and democratic education and points out two polysemous and controversial concepts with elements of convergence: students' voices and participation in schools. Listening to students' voices is closely related to notions of inclusion, since theories of inclusion support the idea of valuing all members' views. In this chapter, illustrative examples from research in primary and secondary schools that focused on students' voices are discussed, to highlight how these can lead to the development of more democratic and inclusive contexts. The first example, comes from a study in one secondary school in Catalonia focused on student participation and examined how a democratic school is conceived in relation to student participation. The second example comes from a study in a primary school in England where dialogues between children and teachers were used as a key to develop inclusive practices. Drawing understandings from the two studies, different challenges and opportunities that emerge in primary and secondary schools that adopt student voice approaches are discussed, to understand the link between the students' role and the promotion of inclusive and democratic education in schools.

Introduction

Nowadays we are living times of reform in front of a complex and changing society, which means that it is crucial to build together active citizenship (Lawy and Biesta, 2006; Osler and Starkey, 2003). This must be a central goal of education in schools (Edelstein, 2011; Cook-Sather, 2002, 2006). Therefore, participation on equal terms is a right for social justice and a right in democratic societies (Hart, 1992).

This chapter sets out to explore how schools can promote democratic and inclusive educational environments and learning contexts through the engagement of students' voices. We argue that it is difficult to define, understand and practise inclusion without the recognition of students' voices. In addition, listening to students' voices can be seen as a way of valuing all members' views in order to develop a participatory and democratic culture in schools.

Concepts of democracy and inclusion in schools

Currently, the definition of democracy in schools is ambiguous and difficult to know how to practise it in school life. In our view, the starting point of democratic schooling is that children and youth must have the power to express their points of view and opinions on all matters affecting them in schools (Simó et al., 2016). Children's rights to be heard has been emphasised through the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). In addition, listening to children's voices has been linked to notions of inclusion (Messiou, 2012, 2018), taking inclusion to mean increasing the presence, participation and achievement of all students (Ainscow, 2007). Linking the concepts of democracy and inclusion can help schools think of ways they could improve democratic practices in everyday school life.

Based on earlier work that three of us (Farré, Simó and Tort) have carried out with colleagues, we have articulated the concept of school democracy from four dimensions (Feu et al., 2017; Simó-Gil and Feu, 2018). First it is governance, which involves the community members' participation in all the bodies and processes related to decision-making. It affects the relationship between members of the educational community in order to develop a common interest. Second is inhabitation, or 'atmosphere' as a synonym, to explain that we are referring not only to the physical conditions of schools, but also to the structures and relations that are built between people. It involves three fundamental aspects: the minimum conditions that make possible the participation of each one of the members of the school community; the receptiveness and quality of the shared life and the sense of wellbeing of the contexts in which participation occurs; and the kind of relationships that take place between all members in schools.

Third is otherness, used in a positive sense in that we aim to give value to difference, moving beyond simple tolerance. This appraisal of otherness leads us to value it as a term that seeks to include all individuals from a conception of equal opportunity for everyone. In this respect, the term 'diversity' can also be used as a synonym. In this meaning, democratic practice consists not only of 'tolerating' the other, but also of giving them visibility and 'normalised' treatment, resituating the relations of power and domination between the hegemonic and the peripheral.

These three dimensions demand a fourth, transversal dimension, ethos, which is understood as the humanist values and virtues needed in order to make this democracy possible. Therefore, it is necessary that these virtues and values permeate the relationships, culture and daily life in schools. Only through these four dimensions it will be possible to enable teachers, students and families to participate fully in schools' democratic processes.

Improving students' participation through analysing these four dimensions can help teacher teams to move towards a democratic school, but it is not enough for including all pupils. This frame of reference calls for another aspect to be taken into account, which is the recognition of students' voices in order to put each child at the centre of learning.

Students' voices and their participation in schools

Democratic schools can provide greater opportunities for students to participate, but it is essential to include all students' voices in the processes of decision-making. Unfortunately, there are still some invisible or marginalized voices in classrooms, so it is necessary to ask whether all students have the same rights and opportunities to get involved and become protagonists of their own learning.

Regarding these ideas, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) provides an important change in how childhood is conceptualised. In fact, the Convention changes the status of children recognising that they must be able to be listened to and must be able to participate in equal conditions to adults (Chawla, 2001; Hill et al., 2004; Sinclair, 2004).

Nonetheless, Messiou refers to the work of Fine (1991) who points out that "schools engage in an active process of 'silencing' students through their policies and practices so as to smooth over social and economic contradictions" (2013, p. 87). Thus, schools must gradually provide increasing opportunities for children to participate in teaching and learning processes. Furthermore, the students' voice movement has been recognised and promoted by many authors (Fielding, 2004; Lodge, 2005; Robinson and Taylor, 2007; Rudduck and Flutter, 2007) who have created frameworks to analyse and evaluate different initiatives that encourage students' participation.

In these new educational contexts, teachers must promote higher levels of participation for all students and guarantee that everybody have the same opportunities to become protagonist of their own learning (Fielding, 2011, 2012).

The research studies

This chapter is based on two research projects that engage with the voices of learners to promote inclusive, democratic and participatory learning environments in schools.

The first one “Engagement with students’ voices to reflect on educational practices in a secondary school. A collaborative research”, is based on a doctoral thesis carried out in a secondary school in Catalonia. The aim was to promote students’ participation in classroom contexts recognizing the students’ voices to reflect on teaching and learning processes. This doctoral research was an output that used the theoretical framework built in “Demoskole: democracy, participation and inclusive education in secondary schools”, a three-year research program (2013-2016) financed by the Spanish Ministry of Education¹. This research aimed to analysing and ensuring more democratic, participatory and inclusive activities in secondary schools.

The second study, “Reaching the ‘hard to reach’: inclusive responses to diversity through child-teacher dialogue” (ReHaRe)² focused on primary education and involved 30 primary schools in five European countries (Austria, Denmark, England, Portugal, Spain). The study was funded by the European Union (2017-2020) and used Inclusive Inquiry (Messiou and Ainscow, 2020), an innovative approach based on earlier research (Messiou and Ainscow, 2015; Messiou et al., 2016). Inclusive Inquiry is described in more detail below. Small teams of university researchers in each country monitored the impact of Inclusive Inquiry. In the specific example used in this chapter, we focus only in one of the English primary schools.

¹ Demoskole (Ref: EDU 2012-39556-C02-01/02) research integrates two coordinated projects; the first is based on primary schools and is coordinated by Jordi Feu (University of Girona) and the second focuses on secondary schools and is coordinated by Núria Simó-Gil (University of Vic - Central University of Catalonia).

² ReHaRe (Ref: 2017-1-UK01-KA201-036665) coordinated by Kyriaki (Kiki) Messiou (University of Southampton, England).

Engagement with students' voices to reflect on educational practices in a secondary school

The first example concerns an investigation carried out in a Compulsory Secondary School (CSE). The school was established in the academic year 2010-2011 and offers studies from 1st to 4th CSE. It is located in a small town (of less than 3000 inhabitants) in the province of Barcelona, near Vic, a city of about 40,000 inhabitants in central Catalonia. The school currently accommodates more than 300 students of this town and other nearby municipalities. The educational project aims to promote the values of a democratic and inclusive society, so its pedagogical approach is embodied in different educational practices such as cooperative work groups in all school subjects, individual tutoring, school support brigades, Service Learning projects, collaborative evaluation or formative assessment (Farré-Riera, 2020). Thus, this school was created as a cooperative learning project with the willingness to ensure educational success for all from an inclusive and democratic perspective (Simó-Gil, Tort-Bardolet, Barniol and Pietx, 2018).

Although the school has a participatory culture and promotes educational practices that offer students greater opportunities to participate, there are children who do not take part in the decision-making processes related to their learning. Therefore, the research aimed to investigate what opportunities students have to participate in the decision-making structures and processes linked to their learning in a centre considered as inclusive and democratic through a collaborative approach.

Methodology: Single case study

The approach used was a single case study (Simons, 2011; Stake, 1998, 2000), involving collaborative processes with teachers and students (Christianakis, 2010; Meyer, 2001) to analyse the challenges and possibilities about students' participation and to promote democratic relationships based on trust, dialogue and negotiation (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995; Devís-Devís, 2006).

The research involved four class groups and four teachers from different curricular subjects. The total number of participants who took part in the research was 78 students divided into four class groups: three groups from 2nd year and one group from 4th year of Compulsory Secondary Education (CSE), to analyse the curricular subjects of Spanish

Language and Electives (Table 1). The Electives were Mathematics Project and Technology project.

| CURRICULAR SUBJECT | STUDENTS | TEACHERS |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| Spanish Language (Group A) | 2nd CSE (19 students) | Teacher 1 |
| Spanish Language (Group B) | 4th CSE (28 students) | Teacher 2 |
| Mathematics Project (Group C) | 2nd CSE (14 students) | Teacher 3 |
| Technology project (Group D) | 2nd CSE (17 students) | Teacher 4 |

Table 1: Curricular subject, students and teachers involved in the research

The research was carried out during the 2016-2017 academic year with the purpose to identify similarities and differences in student participation in both subjects and between both educational stages. Throughout this process different data collection tools have been used, such as: a) observations about each group and subject; b) interviews with teachers and students; c) document analysis; and d) three activities based on participatory strategies to collect all students' voices.

Since the purpose of the research was to place students as active agents in their learning, it was crucial to reduce the disparity of power between teachers and students from a context of well-being, respect and trust. This was achieved through the use of three techniques: a) message in a bottle; b) post-it notes / pyramid discussion; c) diamond nine (Messiou, 2006, 2012). The first aims to collect the voices of students around their participatory capacity in the classroom contexts. The second technique links the participation of children with the opportunities they have to achieve learning through debate, exchange and consensus. The purpose of the third technique was to generate a space for reflective dialogue between students about learning processes to identify what helps them to learn and what elements they do not contribute to the achievement of curricular contents.

Regarding the analysis process, a classification of eight categories and subcategories was developed to interpret the evidence obtained from each group. Nonetheless, for this chapter it is important to highlight four (Table 2):

| CATEGORIES AND SUBCATEGORIES OF ANALYSIS | |
|---|---|
| C1. Engagement with students' voices | |
| Possibilities for recognizing student voices | Challenges for recognizing student voices |
| C2. Participation in classroom contexts | |
| Characteristics of student participation | Factors that facilitate student participation |
| C3. Inclusion as a goal in education | |
| Barriers to learning and participation | Strategies for attention to diversity |
| C4. Improvement of teaching and learning processes | |
| New role for students and teachers | Curricular and methodological changes |

Table 2: Categories and subcategories of analysis

Findings

The study has shown that in the process of moving towards more democratic and participatory educational scenarios there are several elements that need to be reconsidered in the classroom contexts:

a. Students as key agents in education

Findings from C1 category pointed out that students have taken an active role in the decisions that affect the educational practice of the classroom to improve teaching and learning processes. As one student argues, “*it is important to keep in mind the opinion of the people you should be educating*” (Student_GroupC). However, the initial analysis of classroom contexts has shown that students are mostly kept waiting to execute the decisions made by the adults. It occurs especially in the cases of groups A and B, in which teachers are responsible for deciding on central elements of the curriculum. Thus, the capacity for action and decision-making of youth lies mainly in organizational aspects. A similar situation has also emerged in the analysis of groups C and D, although the research has shown that the curricular flexibility of the electives has become a facilitating element to promote a more proactive role of children.

Although most students in the four groups consider that teachers recognize their voices, they stated that this depends on the adult, evidencing the existence of unequal power relations and the challenges of such processes: “*most teachers listen to you but do not take your opinion into account*” (Student_GroupB). Thus, they recognise the existence of clear boundaries set by adults. Moreover, students in the four groups share the idea that

although the recognition of their voices can occur in any type of subject, in the electives these processes become more spontaneous, while in the Spanish subjects it is more complex to find spaces to participate. As a teacher states, *“this is usually a problem of the secondary schools, that there is a double curriculum between electives and other subjects”* (Teacher3).

b. Participatory learning contexts

Data from C2 category has shown that students were come more involved in their learning processes when they feel challenged in the design and development of classroom proposals to move towards co-responsibility with educational action. As one teacher pointed out: *“it is so interesting to promote student participation because you even do a little self-criticism of yourself and change things in your practice”* (Teacher4). Therefore, it has been crucial to analyse the students’ participation as well as the limits they have for getting involved in classroom proposals.

Most students recognize the benefits of working in cooperative groups in all curricular subjects to achieve the learning objectives and to become more actively involved in learning contexts. This methodological strategy generates different spaces of debate and exchange that arises as a result of this approach. As a student points out: *“in cooperative groups we finish the assignments earlier and they come out better”* (Student_GroupD).

They argue that through cooperative groups higher levels of participation are achieved and mutual help is favoured, because they can resolve issues and reach more shared and consensual solutions among all members: *“if you are not good at something, with the cooperative group you are more welcomed, and if you are alone you get more nervous”* (Student_GroupA). Thus, students prioritize this methodological approach over individual tasks for the achievement of curricular goals.

Teachers recognize that working in cooperative groups lies in the dialogue, debate and the shared agreements among their members to construct a common content (Bragg and Fielding, 2005). However, as one teacher points out, *“the fact that they are in groups of four does not assure you anything. They can sit like this and be completely independent of each other”* (Teacher1). Teachers argue the importance of promoting activities that

encourage a genuine exchange of opinions, which generates more involvement and motivation for their own learning.

c. Inclusive education and attention to diversity

The analysis of data from C3 category has shown that it is difficult to move towards more participatory classroom contexts without relocating these relationships and reconsidering what children are able to contribute to learning processes. Therefore, changes in the student's role necessarily leads to a rethinking of the teachers' role in classroom contexts.

The school is committed to a teacher's role that aims to facilitate learning environments through different strategies and resources to encourage individual skills based on a critical and reflective attitude (Susinos and Ceballos, 2012; Susinos and Rodríguez-Hoyos, 2011). This reality promotes a real transformation of the school scenario towards a real educational inclusion.

The four adults were open, flexible and critical teachers of their own practice and sensitive to the children's motivations, interests and individual needs. As some students pointed out, the teachers who listen to them and recognize their voices are empathetic with their private lives, not only worried about the achievement of curricular content. As a girl argues: *"they are empathetic teachers who understand you and know how to get out of their role as a teacher"* (Student_GroupB). Moreover, promoting educational contexts based on trust and respect is crucial, especially for those children who are shy and more embarrassed to express their opinions: *"with these closest and empathetic teachers the shyest students dare to ask"* (Student_GroupD).

In this process, adults use a variety of measures and strategies to respond to diversity in classrooms and overcome barriers to learning and participation, such as considering diversity as a positive factor, grouping students according to the logic of heterogeneity, facilitating an atmosphere of well-being or planning complementary activities to give answer to the diversity of rates. In some cases, the school also promotes co-teaching in some curricular subjects and class groups.

d. Improvement of teaching and learning contexts

Data from C4 category showed that teacher's main goal is not to transmit knowledge in participatory learning contexts but for providing appropriate classroom experiences, resources, and teaching and learning activities to help all learners to learn as much as possible. To achieve this, it is essential to rethink not only the roles of teachers and students, but also curricular, organizational and methodological aspects.

In relation to this, the students of the four groups demand dynamic, practical and interactive activities to increase their attention and motivation, since as one student points out *"it is necessary that they motivate us because we are a group of unmotivated"* (Student_GroupA). As one teacher suggests, it is important for students to be able to *"take part in how and what is learned, therefore, in the teaching and learning process"* (Teacher2) or another that asserts: *"experience tells us that when you give a student space to participate, that learning becomes his or her own"* (Teacher4). However, in this process several elements have emerged that can hinder the progress towards participatory learning contexts, such as the complexity in group management, curricular pressure management, the value of working for skills or the presence of two teachers in order to ensure the well-being atmosphere in classroom contexts.

As a result of the research, the importance of rethinking the typology of curricular contents that are offered in order to link learning with the reality of young people emerged. Thus, the educational activities implemented as a result of the recognition of the voices of students have taken into account the interests, needs and curiosities of young people, as well as the academic guidelines suggested by teachers, promoting a real collaborative work.

“Reaching the ‘hard to reach’: inclusive responses to diversity through child-teacher dialogue”

The primary school used in this example is a fast-expanding primary school, with 630 children on roll in 21 classes, in the City of Southampton, England. It occupies a new building, which opened in September 2013, with extensive grounds. The school serves a diverse population and is committed to identifying ways of making sure that all children are included in the learning process and treats all of its pupils as individuals, focusing on

the progress of all children, whilst also valuing the creativity and difference in every child, which is why it is developing an ever-broadening curriculum and school clubs programme. This includes specialist music and instrument teaching, environmental studies and a range of sports activities in curriculum time, together with school clubs such as Art, Drama, French, Taekwondo and Dance. The school is committed to the professional learning of all staff and has a well-developed programme of school-based staff development activities. This was one of the reasons that they got involved with the ReHaRe project and used Inclusive Inquiry.

Methodology: Collaborative action research

The study employed collaborative action research processes where “different stakeholders function as co-researchers’ (Mitchell, Reilly, & Logue, 2009, p. 345). The main aim of the study was to find out how we could reach out to all learners in schools, particularly those seen as ‘hard to reach’, through dialogues about learning and teaching between children and teachers.

The approach used in the study was Inclusive Inquiry which involves teachers and children working together to co-design lessons that are inclusive. What is distinctive, however, is the involvement of some students as researchers: collecting and analysing their classmates’ views about learning and teaching, and observing and refining the lessons in collaboration with their teachers. In practice, it involves three steps: Plan, Teach and Analyse. In practice, teachers form trios to design a lesson together. Each of the teachers chooses three students, that are seen as “hard to reach” in some ways who become researchers. They receive training from their teachers about collecting their classmates’ views and analysing these, in order to inform the planning of the lesson. At the same time, they are trained as to how to make classroom observations. Following the collection of their classmates’ views about learning and teaching, they plan collaboratively with their teachers a lesson taking all students’ views into account. The lesson is taught by one of the teachers, whilst being observed by the other teachers in the trio and the student researchers from the other classes. At the end of the lesson an analysis follows, focusing on student engagement through the lesson’s activities. Modifications are made to the lesson in the light of the observations and the process is repeated again with the second teacher teaching the refined lesson. The process is repeated three times.

The approach was used in 30 schools in five countries, as explained above. Lesson observations, interviews with the student researchers and discussions after the lessons between teachers and students were analysed collaboratively by the researchers, teachers and student researchers. ‘Group interpretive processes’ (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006) were used for analysis and interpretation. Such processes provided a means of establishing trustworthiness, using the member check approach recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985). In addition, accounts of practice (a total of 783 pages) that were prepared collaboratively between researchers and teachers were analysed thematically.

In this chapter, we focus on one example from a school in England, where three Year 3 classes (7-8 years old children) used Inclusive Inquiry. A total of around ninety students and three teachers were involved in the specific example, though the whole school implemented the approach. The power of engaging with students’ voices and moving into dialogues with students about learning and teaching is illustrated through this example:

The three teachers decided to focus on a literacy lesson, about the use of inverted commas. Nine student researchers collected their classmates’ views about what helps them to learn. Having analysed this information, they then designed a lesson with their teachers, taking into account everyone’s ideas. One of the decisions made, based on students’ suggestions was to include iPads in the lesson.

When the first lesson was taught and observed by the other two teachers and student researchers from the other two classes, they noticed that this may have not been as effective as they had planned. For example, in the discussion that followed the first lesson they said:

Student 1(girl): I saw that while she (the teacher) was speaking, a lot of people weren’t listening - they were too interested in the iPad.

Teacher: Uh, they were weren’t they? They were quite distracted by them, I think. I felt as the teacher, I didn’t know if they were taking on board my instructions properly but also I feel that it distracted my children from maybe getting on with their tasks or at least having a go first of all before then looking but I don’t know. What do you think? Do you think they did the best work with their activities?

Responding to this request for more information, one student went on:

S2(G): I saw three people, like John, who did a few words and then did nothing.

T3: Uh, what were they doing instead?

S2(G): They were playing on the iPad.

T3: Ok, so they didn't actually focus on their work in there but just focussed on their iPad. What about other children? Did you see some people doing their work?

S2(G): Some people worked and some people didn't.

S3(B): I found it distracting.

After a lengthy discussion as to whether the Ipads helped or not, and whether they should be kept in the lesson, one of the girls suggested the following:

S3(G): Instead of using iPad you could get a video about inverted commas on the computer and you could check children then.

T3: Who agrees with C's idea? What do you think?

This was an idea that was introduced in the next lesson. Having these discussions at the end of each lesson helped with refining the lesson, with a focus on student engagement. Following implementation of Inclusive Inquiry (a full cycle of three lessons), wider implications for learning were discussed and taken into account for future lessons, such as having students working in pairs, allowing students to try a task first before the teacher models an approach for them and using technology more effectively.

Reflecting on the impact of using Inclusive Inquiry on children, one of the teachers said about students in her class:

'Some of my children are more vocal to say: actually, this environment is really helping me with my learning or it's too noisy; I really can't concentrate; or just little things like that. These are children who wouldn't have said anything before. It seems to give them a little bit of ownership of kind of sharing their views.'

The impact of using Inclusive Inquiry was more significant for those children that took the role of researchers. It was noticed that they became more confident. As one of them

said: *“I can be quite shy sometimes and it’s a different feeling when you actually feel brave enough to stand up in front of people and say something.”*

This example illustrates how allowing students’ views to be heard, and more importantly, moving into dialogues between children and teachers, led to the refinement of existing practices and the creation of more inclusive environments. At the same time, we saw how students became more engaged in learning processes. This links to other studies’ findings in secondary schools, such as Wilson’s (2000) study where he demonstrated how student voice approaches can empower students themselves and can lead to ‘deep participation’. Similarly, other studies led to students’ growth of agency, belonging and competence (Mitra, 2003, 2004; Mitra and Serriere, 2012).

Conclusions

Engaging with students’ voices in schools is a challenging, yet worthwhile process. As discussed above, in using such approaches there are tensions involved, such as unequal power relations between students and teachers. Such tensions can be addressed to some extent, if the approaches used move beyond gathering of students’ views, into having dialogues, such as through the use of Inclusive Inquiry. Moreover, in the secondary school example in Catalonia, changes in power relations have been promoted towards scenarios of co-responsibility between students and teachers (Fielding, 2018). To achieve this, it has been key to recognize the students’ voices with a commitment to a model of participatory democracy that places students and teachers in a context of greater horizontality.

In both examples collaborative research approaches facilitated the creation of more horizontal and egalitarian relationships as well as the interpretation and understanding of an educational reality through the meanings constructed by the studies’ participants. This has become a coherent approach for the recognition of students’ voices and led to the development of contexts of greater democracy. Therefore, the approaches used in the two studies have generated constant spaces for reflection and exchanges about teaching practices in order to identify possible barriers that may limit equal access to learning.

The two examples described in this chapter increased the active role of students by recognizing them as individuals capable of being part of the decision-making processes linked to their own learning and inquiry. Thus, they have ceased to be the object of educational practice to become subjects able of transforming it (De Haro et al., 2019; Schwandt, 2000).

Lodge (2005) argues that dialogue "...is more than conversation, it is the building of shared narrative. Dialogue is about engagement with others through talk to arrive at a point one would not get to alone" (p. 134). These dialogues have the potential of strengthening the four dimensions of school democracy that we outlined at the start of this chapter, by valuing all students' views and actively promoting their participation, whilst at the same time facilitating the development of a strong inclusive atmosphere and ethos. Such dialogues, we argue, can lead to the development of more inclusive and democratic schools.

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