



“Inclusive education: action narratives for the creation of educational, community and research networks”

Dialogue and student participation in educational research and practice: Promoting inclusion in schools. Lecture by Kyriaki Messiou

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ABSTRACT

Kyriaki Messiou is Professor of Education at the University of Southampton (UK). She was Director of Research and Deputy Head of the School of Education at Southampton and co-directed the Centre for Research on Inclusion (CRI). Known internationally for her research in the field of inclusive education, her work focuses on the voices of children and young people as a means of understanding marginalisation and developing inclusive practices in schools. In this introductory article, we present the main arguments of the paper presented by Kyriaki Messiou at the XIX International Congress and XXXIX Conference on University and Inclusive Education, reflecting on some relevant aspects of inclusion, specifically on the importance of the participation of all those who make up the educational context and the importance of collaborative work and collaborative research actions in order to promote inclusion and inclusive practices in schools.

Keywords: participation, collaboration, research, inclusive education

“Educación inclusiva: relatos para la creación de redes educativas, comunitarias y de investigación” Diálogo y participación del alumnado en la investigación y la práctica educativa: Promoviendo la inclusión en las escuelas. Conferencia de Kyriaki Messiou

RESUMEN

Kyriaki Messiou es Catedrática de Educación en la Universidad de Southampton (Reino Unido). Fue Directora de Investigación y Jefa Adjunta de la Escuela de Educación de Southampton y codirigió el Centro de Investigación sobre la Inclusión (CRI). Conocida internacionalmente por sus investigaciones en el campo de la educación inclusiva, su trabajo se centra en las voces de niño, niñas y jóvenes como medio para comprender la marginación y desarrollar prácticas inclusivas en las escuelas. En este artículo introductorio, presentamos los principales argumentos de la ponencia presentada por Kyriaki Messiou en el XIX Congreso Internacional y XXXIX Jornadas de la Red de Universidades y Educación Inclusiva (RUEI), reflexionando sobre algunos aspectos relevantes de la inclusión, concretamente sobre la importancia de la participación de todos y todas los que conforman el contexto educativo y la importancia del trabajo colaborativo y de las acciones de investigación colaborativa para promover la inclusión y las prácticas inclusivas en las escuelas.

Palabras clave: participación, colaboración, investigación, educación inclusiva

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1. Introduction

The INKLUNI research team of the UPV/EHU organised the “XIX International Congress and XXXIX Conference on University and Inclusive Education, with the slogan “Weaving inclusive networks”, which was held in Donostia in March 2024. The inaugural conference by Kyriaki Messiou was entitled “Developing collaborative action research and research-practice partnerships: Promoting inclusion in schools”. This article aims to share the main ideas of this lecture in order to stimulate reflection and promote educational improvement, focusing on the voices of students.

2. Key concepts around educational inclusion

The presentation began with several thought-provoking questions, such as: what more can schools do to promote inclusion and social justice? How can we engage with students’ views to promote inclusion and inclusive practices in schools? How can we develop collaborative action research with schools to promote inclusion, practical research partnerships?

In terms of reflections on pupils’ voices, while it is true that in different schools there is often a suggestion box where students can post their ideas for changes, it is essential that these ideas are not only listened to, but also responded to. Therefore, when students are asked to express their ideas, it is important explaining to them whether or not it is possible to do what they propose and why. It is also essential to ask: why are we doing this?; why are we asking our students?

In general, pupils often perceive teachers as very busy filling who may sometimes forget the people in front of them, young people with other needs. Although fantastic work is done in many schools, there is always more that can be done. So what more can we do? How can we push for inclusion, social justice and how can we take into account the learner’s point of view to encourage inclusion and practical thinking? And if such dialogue between students and teachers is encouraged, research needs to be done on what to do with the results of this dialogue and how researchers can be involved. It should be noted that in recent years the speaker has been working on such projects to promote inclusion.

As key concepts, she points out that there are many definitions of educational inclusion, recognising key aspects pointed out by experts (e.g. Ainscow, 2007):

- This is an ongoing process that is not achieved in one moment.
- It is important to identify the barriers to learning and participation encountered by learners in order to remove them, both in the school context and in the wider context.
- Keep in mind three key aspects such as: presence, participation and achievement of all students.

An increasing number of authors place importance on capturing the voices of learners based on their right to be heard. The concept of student voice is a broad concept, which includes the idea of students becoming researchers and/or co-researchers in collecting and analysing data. Dialogue, according to Lodge (2005) “is more than a 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”.

The speaker emphasised that, in her research, the students also participate in the research, making all those involved in the school/classroom into participating researchers, since the aim is to improve education. One type of research, which aims to over-

come the disconnection between the university and the school, is that of collaborative action research, and has great potential to generate the necessary transformation in school contexts.

The concept of “Inclusive Inquiry” (Messiou and Ainscow, 2020) refers to a process with interconnected elements. For her, to talk about inclusive research is to talk about learning and teaching, and this was fundamental; likewise, in her research, she says, “we talk about what we learn from experience and this is where they lived experiences of students, teachers and researchers come in, we learn from everyone and from working together through inclusive action. But the main feature, which is at the centre of the Inclusive Inquiry process is the dialogue that takes place between students and teachers”. Professor Messiou goes on to say that we can learn from differences, from the teaching-learning process, but change comes from the dialogue between students and teachers. This is what really has an impact on everything else. That is to say, the fact that there is this dialogue and that the voice of the students is heard transforms what happens in the school. And why does this happen? Because students have a different perspective and thanks to dialogue it is possible to develop inclusive thinking and inclusive actions.

3. Experiences with collaborative action research in schools

Kiki Messiou talks about her experience in collaborative research projects with schools and universities. Specifically, the project Reaching the ‘hard to reach’: inclusive responses to diversity through child-teacher dialogue (2017-2020) (primary schools) that she led and in which a total of 30 schools and 5 universities from 5 countries (Austria, Denmark, Spain, England and Portugal) participated.

One of the key aims of this project was to make progress in the inclusive responses to student diversity through dialogue by setting up a collaborative action-research project. This involved defining the roles of each stakeholder from the outset, both from the schools and the university. Thus, while the school practitioners are in practice, a practice that is developing, and on which they need to do research to help them plan teaching and evaluate it; the university researchers provide the conceptual framework of understanding such as research questions, observation and analysis of results that we offer to the school practitioners for comparison, as well as support schools in implementing research approaches. In this collaborative research work, everyone benefits. The school practitioners by knowing how to develop better and more inclusive practices and the researchers by expanding their understandings and contributing to knowledge.

As the speaker pointed out, any school wishing to use this research approach – Inclusive Inquiry- will involve three phases for its development:

- A first planning phase in which students and teachers (usually three) jointly plan a lesson (the research lesson). Some students are chosen to participate in the role of researchers (usually three from each class). These were selected from among those facing difficulties in their class group.
- The second phase is the teaching of the lesson by one of the teachers, whilst student researchers and the other two teachers observe it.
- The third phase, once the session is over, the group of pupils and teachers meet and analyse if the session went as planned and identify aspects that should be changed, especially thinking about how to improve pupils’ participation and interest.

For Professor Messiou, this is the perspective of this model: to analyse the extent to which the actions we propose in the classroom favour participation and involvement. This project has been developed in 5 countries and its main implications can be seen on at least three levels:

- *On students*: training in the planning and development of the sessions improves student participation and confidence, especially for those students with more difficulties or less confidence who took part as researchers or when they gave oral presentations.
- *On the improvement of relationships*. For some of them, both teachers and students, this was the first time they had done collaborative work among the teaching staff; this was emphasised both by the teaching staff because they were not used to it, and by the student-researchers, who had never had this type of relationship with their classmates and teachers.
- *On professional development*: changes were also seen in specific aspects of practice with the observation exercise. For example, when they were asked to describe their practice and contrasted with the results of the observation, they reflected on where they saw themselves doing something different, they became aware of what they were not doing well, they improved their relationship with the students by speaking to them more softly, more sensitively.

For Messiou, it is very important to promote this collaborative work with both teachers and students. Therefore, we must continue to make progress in schools and universities on how we can promote inclusion in schools through the incorporation of student voices. Their “School Voices Research-Practice Partnership” (<https://schoolvoices.soton.ac.uk/>) is an example where the voice of students, teachers and families is a partnership of research and practice (Messiou et al., 2024).

That is, there is a long-term commitment and concern to drive transformation through research, and a way to intentionally change existing power relations and to ensure that everyone has an equal chance to participate. A participation of all those who are part of the school, which they call school partnerships. As she argued, this kind of research is important since “For research to matter, that is, to better society and schools, it must escape the ivory tower and engage in the public sphere” (Oakes, 2017, p.91).

Messiou insists that we have to ask ourselves how we see ourselves as researchers and whether what we do is having a direct impact on the field. For her, collaborative action research helps us to do this.

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