In order to increase knowledge and understanding of educational settings as inclusive communities we strive to understand what supports inclusion as well as to critique barriers. Increasingly we are seeking to understand inclusion from the inside, from the perspective of the students. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child upholds children’s rights to express their views in matters that affect them and to have those views taken into consideration and acted upon, that is, actively included in decision-making. A serious consideration of Article 12 involves two rights – the right to express a view and the right to have those views given due weight. In this volume we will share a compilation of research from Aotearoa New Zealand and beyond that aimed to access and listen to the views of students. We have brought together voices of students from different educational contexts, seeking their perspectives on learning, wellbeing, disciplinary procedures, literacy intervention and what makes schools good.
Student Perspectives on School
STUDIES IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Volume 35

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Scope

This series addresses the many different forms of exclusion that occur in schooling across a range of international contexts and considers strategies for increasing the inclusion and success of all students. In many school jurisdictions the most reliable predictors of educational failure include poverty, Aboriginality and disability. Traditionally schools have not been pressed to deal with exclusion and failure. Failing students were blamed for their lack of attainment and were either placed in segregated educational settings or encouraged to leave and enter the unskilled labour market. The crisis in the labor market and the call by parents for the inclusion of their children in their neighborhood school has made visible the failure of schools to include all children.

Drawing from a range of researchers and educators from around the world, Studies in Inclusive Education will demonstrate the ways in which schools contribute to the failure of different student identities on the basis of gender, race, language, sexuality, disability, socio-economic status and geographic isolation. This series differs from existing work in inclusive education by expanding the focus from a narrow consideration of what has been traditionally referred to as special educational needs to understand school failure and exclusion in all its forms. Moreover, the series will consider exclusion and inclusion across all sectors of education: early years, elementary and secondary schooling, and higher education.
Student Perspectives on School

Informing Inclusive Practice

Edited by

Jeanette Berman
Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand
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and

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FOREWORD

by John O’Neill

Educational research that advocates strongly for children’s rights is both welcome and essential in today’s Aotearoa where 155,000 or 14 percent of children live in material hardship, 295,000 or 28 percent live in income poverty, and 90,000 or 8 percent live in low income and material hardship households. Such figures starkly contextualise national legislation and policy statements that acknowledge the principles of educational inclusion, participation and serving the best educational interests of children, but fall far short of their realisation. The editors and contributors to this volume are to be commended for documenting practical ways in which children and young people can be empowered to work alongside researchers in order to have their voices heard, listened and acted upon in meaningful, life-improving and life-enhancing ways through ordinary, day to day teaching and learning practices. This book encourages educators to make personal and collective moral commitments to increasing children and young people’s agency as learners. We might all readily agree that children have the right to articulate and advance their best interests. This book begins the far more difficult task of trialling diverse ways in which adults can help children realise their rights in formal educational settings.

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FOREWORD

by Lorraine Graham

The year that the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) was signed was the year I began teaching initial teacher education classes in inclusive education. Those early classes were part of stand-alone subjects, focused more on teacher actions than the students who were ‘included’. Fast forward twenty-three years and Jeanette and I have just guided the launch of eight courses across early childhood, primary and secondary streams that bring together understandings about pedagogy, assessment and inclusion as core knowledge necessary for all initial teacher education candidates. Students, as gloriously individual learners, are securely at the centre of these subjects. Though some students remain marginalized, excluded and segregated from education with their same age peers, the rise of the children’s rights movement, greater attention to active citizenship and the incorporation of an ethic of care into school improvement, have meant that these same students are increasingly acknowledged as part of the solution necessary to transform educational systems. Accessing and then acting upon student voice has emerged, as this book illustrates, as a powerful tool for understanding and constructing inclusive school cultures. Such cultures are respectful of students’ rights, have a focus on the development of relationships that allow people to accomplish their goals, and build sustainable, caring environments that support the learning of all. Similarly, this book and the ‘welcoming voice’ of its chapters, invites readers to contemplate the interrelated themes of community, relationships, care and empowerment – in every classroom, every day, for every learner.

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1. CHILDREN’S RIGHTS AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

Two Anniversaries

The year 2014 marked the 25th and 20th anniversaries respectively of two of the most significant documents with implications for education. The first was the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), widely known simply as the UNCRC. The second was the Salamanca Statement and Framework on Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), widely known as the Salamanca Statement. Both relate to the rights of children.

The UNCRC was adopted by the General Assembly in 1989. It created an international legal framework for the protection and promotion of the rights of children and young people under the age of 18, and incorporated the full range of human rights – civil, cultural, economic, political and social (Coppock & Gillet-Swan, 2016). Children’s rights are human rights; they are indivisible and interdependent such that denying certain rights undermines other rights (Freeman, 2007).

The World Conference on Special Needs Education in Spain in 1994 reflected an ongoing human rights debate centered around growing dissatisfaction with segregated education for disabled students. It culminated in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). Signed by representatives of 92 governments and 25 international organisations from around the world, the Statement reflected a consensus on future directions for ‘special needs’ education to be underpinned by the principles of inclusion.

The anniversaries of these two documents were the impetus for this book, which was begun in the same year, 2014. In this book we present the perspectives of children and young people on their school experiences. These experiences provide a first-hand account of the successes, issues and remaining challenges of application of two of the key principles of these landmark documents, the right to a voice and the right to inclusion.

Children’s Rights to a Voice

The UNCRC provided for a range of rights for children. While concerned generally with children’s rights as they play out in children’s lives at school, the authors
contributing to this book have a particular interest in the actualisation of Article 12 of the UNCRC, which relates to children’s autonomy and participation rights. Article 12 requires that States Parties:

…assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (United Nations, 1989, Article 12.1)

But what do we really know about the impact of the UNCRC, and particularly of Article 12, on children’s day-to-day lives in the education settings that readers of this book might be interested in? According to Smith (2016) measures to safeguard children’s rights generally at school are not very common, and the idea of children having rights in educational contexts still remains controversial. While schools are mandated under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to protect the rights of disabled pupils, for example, Hodge (2015) maintains that to date there has also been very little engagement by teachers with this particular human rights agenda. Smith (2016) argues that it really matters that we acknowledge that children have rights, and that this acceptance of children’s rights actually makes a difference to the kind of lives that children lead. For that reason, Smith emphasizes that, “It is a change in attitudes, perceptions, and ways of interacting with children that I hope to encourage by writing this book” (p. 2). Our book continues in that tradition.

Taking the requirements of Article 12 as the new norm in children’s rights practice and policy, there has been a proliferation of research over the past 25 years that has sought children’s views on various issues affecting their everyday lives, and the numerous policy and practice initiatives that have been developed, premised on improving consultation with children and the participation of children in the design, delivery and evaluation of services that affect them (Coppock & Gillett-Swan, 2016). But in a critical exploration of academic work on the UNCRC, Reynaert, Bouverne-de Bie, and Vandevelde (2009) have argued that rather than impacting positively on children’s lives, a ‘global children’s rights industry’ (p. 526) has led to children’s rights being ‘bogged down in consensus thinking’ (p. 527). Children’s rights have consequently become technicized into standards setting, implementation and monitoring that decontextualizes their rights from their lived experiences. They argue for a shift in orientation towards research “that provides empirical evidence on the impact that the rhetoric of children’s rights has in daily practice” (p. 529), providing a more nuanced examination of the contexts in which the UNCRC is applied in practice. Such evidence would include the voices of children themselves.

Children’s Rights to Inclusion

The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) asserted the right of all students to receive their education in the ‘regular’ classroom, and urged educational systems
to consider the diversity of children’s experiences, to overcome discriminatory
mindsets and work towards schools that are for all. Twenty years on, however,
achieving the ideals of the Salamanca Statement has been challenging with numbers
of students still marginalized, excluded or segregated from education with their same
age peers (Morton et al., 2012). There has been a call in the research literature on
inclusive education to explore and learn from schools that are working in innovative
and effective ways to enhance the presence, participation and learning of diverse
student groups (Florian, Young, & Rouse, 2010). This requires listening to the voices
of students, particularly those with needs that reflect those rights.

Our Focus in This Book – The Students’ Perspectives

We began working on this book in the hope that we might help to bridge some of
the gaps between international guidance designed to support children’s lives, and
the reality of their experience at school. We hope that this book may go some way
towards meeting the challenges described above, while also extending the discussion
so that children’s and young people’s rights are prominent in developments within
inclusive education.

Working at the nexus of rights and inclusion we want to consider how children’s
and young people’s participation rights under Article 12 of the UNCRC can be
enacted in education settings; what the enabling factors and barriers are to their
presence, participation and learning; and how schools might include rights as a
concern in their development as inclusive communities.

One of the aims of this book therefore is to raise awareness of how the UNCRC’s
provisions can be applied in education in the spirit and context in which it was first
drafted. We encourage readers to consider how children and young people can be
assured of their right to express their views; how they can be supported to do so;
and how professionals working in education can ensure that there is an audience
listening, taking these views seriously, and acting upon them in generous and child
empowering ways.

To support this consideration and reflection we have brought together student
voices from a variety of different contexts in order to explore inclusion from the
inside, from the perspective of the students themselves as they participate and learn
at school. Although most of the voices are those of students who are children or
young people, we have also included two groups of adult students; experienced
teachers, including teachers who are continuing their learning as specialist teachers,
and pre-service teachers as they grapple with the need to hear their own students’
voices as part of being responsive in their teaching. In this way we travel full circle
from young children to their teachers, who are listening to, and are responsive to
their students’ voices.

In the remainder of this chapter we present an overview of the why, what and
how of student’s rights and voice. We start with a consideration of the place of
children’s rights within a broader inclusive education framework today, reflecting
on the expectations of the UNCRC and Salamanca Statement to hear and act on student perspectives as a usual part of inclusive education practice. What we might understand student voice to be, and how it can be facilitated, is outlined in light of a pragmatic framework (Lundy, 2007) derived from the UNCRC. A brief description of the voices in this book is followed by a description of the methods used to access those voices. We conclude with a consideration of the impact of taking student perspectives into account, not only for those teachers who use students’ views to make changes in their practice, but also the power of the process of facilitating voice itself as an agent of change.

CHILDREN’S RIGHTS AND CHILDREN’S VIEWS IN EDUCATION

The Context of Children’s Rights

In considering why it remains important to take children’s rights seriously, Professor of Law and advocate for children’s rights, Michael Freeman, stresses the connections between children’s rights, their agency, and their full participation in society:

Rights are important because those who have them can exercise agency. Agents are decision-makers. They are people who can negotiate with others, who are capable of altering relationships or decisions, who can shift social assumptions and constraints. And there is now clear evidence that even the youngest can do this … As agents, rights-bearers they can participate. They can make their own lives, rather than having their lives made for them. And participation is a fundamental human right. It enables us to demand rights. We are, of course, better able to do so where there is freedom of speech, so that orthodoxies (for example, about children and their abilities and incapacities) can be challenged; freedom of association, so that understandings can be nourished; and freedom of information. It is common to deny children all three of these freedoms. (Freeman, 2007, p. 8)

Historically, of course, children have had little status, leading to a denial of rights. Public discourses of childhood have traditionally framed children as the property of their parents or guardians, as incompetent, immanent, and innocent (Freeman, 2007; Phillips, 2016). Where children are conceptualized as reliant on adults for care, protection and education, and as under the rule of their parents, teachers and schools, they are likely to be excluded from various social practices and responsibilities, they remain voiceless, perhaps even invisible, their opportunities for participation rights drastically reduced (Freeman, 2007; Phillips, 2016). Freeman notes that promoting children’s rights does not mean undermining the rights of adults, although this is a frequent criticism of a children’s rights agenda. It is not in a child’s interests to be raised in an environment where parents’ rights are wrongly ignored. Support for children necessarily involves supporting children’s care-givers, teachers, and vice-versa. The concept of participation rights in such societies is actually vital in
acknowledging children’s role as citizens who play an important role in democratic processes. Recognizing these rights can “…nurture children’s sense of belonging and inclusion, and give them the opportunity to bring about change themselves … (Smith, 2016, p. 12). These qualities are essential, Smith contends, both for individuals and for democratic societies. Thinking in terms of children’s rights ensures that new and often different voices are heard. Such thinking can act as a catalyst to support different relationships and interactions between children and adults, including in schools, contributing to a better world for children (Freeman, 2007; Smith, 2016).

The Challenge of ‘Voice’

UNCRC Article 12 is the particular focus for contributors to this book. Serious consideration of Article 12 involves two rights – the right to express a view and the right to have those views given due weight (UNCRC, 1989). This notion of having presenting a view and having it heard is referred to as giving a child ‘voice’. Reference to children’s ‘voices’ are frequent in the literature on rights-based education. However, in an influential article Lundy (2007) argues that “Voice is not enough”. In order to meet our obligations to Article 12, Lundy breaks these rights into four key areas for focus in research and practice (see Figure 1):

- **Space**: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view
- **Voice**: Children must be facilitated to express their views
- **Audience**: The view must be listened to
- **Influence**: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate (following the research, children should know what decision was made; how their views were regarded; and the reasons why action has proceeded in a certain way).

![Figure 1. Space, Voice, Audience and Influence in Article 12.](Adapted from Lundy (2007, p. 932)
The interconnected nature of children’s rights is demonstrated in Figure 1. Rights to have a voice must be considered in the context of other rights articulated in the UNCRC. The most recognized umbrella provision is that, at all levels of decision-making in public and private organisations, the best interests of the child (Article 3) must be taken into account (Kalverboer, 2016). In order for the best interests of the child to be paramount, perspectives from that child need to be accessed and considered, thus Article 12 is activated. In conjunction with these articles are those related to education, Article 28 states that children have the right to access education, and Article 29 that the education must be directed to the full development of the child’s personality and talents. In this regard, when determining what is in each child’s best interests in policy and practice, a focus on the holistic development of every child is imperative, taking into account their perspectives, interests and aspirations.

Lundy’s model captures the complexity of ‘voice’ and carries an implicit challenge to researchers to acknowledge and respond to this complexity. Each of the contributors to this book takes up this challenge, explicitly or implicitly.

Children’s Rights in New Zealand and Australian Schools

The contributors to this book are based primarily in New Zealand, and to a lesser extent Australia. It is therefore from these countries that most of the perspectives are presented. When it comes to recognising, let alone responding to children’s rights, both countries have some way to go. In both New Zealand and Australia, children’s rights remain largely invisible in law (including education law), poorly embedded in education policy, and weakly implemented in classrooms (Phillips, 2016; Smith, 2016). Citing Lundy’s documentary analysis of the published reports of the UN Committee in relation to educational policy, Smith (2016) notes particular areas of concern where children’s rights need far more scrutiny, including access to school, corporal punishment, bullying, exclusion, discrimination, school discipline and participation.

A New Zealand example provides evidence of this country’s failure to address its obligations under international human rights conventions, including the UNCRC, leaving children without a voice in relation to inclusion. Education for All (EFA), a network of Disabled Persons Organisations and disability NGOs in New Zealand (Inclusive NZ, 2016), alerted the Minister for Education to persistent barriers that leave some children unable to exercise their right to attend or fully participate in their local school, and petitioned the Minister to meet New Zealand’s international human rights obligations by providing every disabled person with an inclusive education. Citing Article 12 of the UNCRC, the New Zealand Children’s Commissioner, Judge Andrew Beecroft, has also called for a halt to significant work on New Zealand’s Education Amendment Bill indicating that it would be “hard to think of a matter that affected (children) more than education”, noting his astonishment that “…this bill
has been prepared and reached this far without any demonstrable….consultation with children” (Gerritson, 2017).

In October 2016, the UNCRC Committee’s Concluding Observations (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016) highlighted a deep concern for children’s rights and child poverty in New Zealand, and an overall lack of compliance with the UNCRC. Enduring high levels of poverty have led to deprivation in children’s lives and a negative impact on their education, while government efforts to preserve Māori identity were considered insufficient. Groups of New Zealand children found to be not doing as well as others and as vulnerable to discrimination, included Māori and Pasifika children; children with disabilities; migrant, refugee and children from minority communities; and children from the LGBTI community. In relation to schools the report described children with disabilities; children in rural areas; Māori, Pacific and minority children; asylum-seeking children; teenage mothers; dropouts; and non-attendees as unable to fully enjoy their right to education due to problems with being enrolled in school or continuing their education. Bullying was highlighted as a widespread problem, along with the number of suspensions and exclusions affecting children from groups that are generally low on school achievement.

The Meaning of Inclusion

The UNCRC gives a high priority to education, so in relation to the vision of the Salamanca Statement, we should expect that children’s rights are prominent in discussions about inclusion, and in the actions of education systems as they work towards inclusion. Inclusive education is fundamentally grounded in ideas about rights, fairness and justice. It involves a particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement. It is a principle in the New Zealand curriculum, and is reflected in education policy, Success for All (Ministry of Education, 2014). Both New Zealand and Australian school curricula are premised on sets of inclusive values that include concerns for diversity, fairness, equity, justice and human rights, and as such provide a solid foundation for considering what children’s rights might look like when they are in the forefront of developments in inclusive school communities.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development Report, ‘No more failures: ten steps to equity in education’ (OECD, 2007) described equity in education as including two dimensions, fairness and inclusion. Fairness means ensuring that personal and social circumstances (such as gender, socio-economic status, ethnic origin, disability) are not barriers to educational success for any child or young person; while inclusion implies ensuring that there is a minimum basic standard of education for all. The report argued that “…a fair and inclusive education is desirable because of the human rights imperative for people to develop
their capacities and participate fully in society” (Ainscow, 2015, p. 90). Illustrating the connection between rights and inclusion, Ainscow (2016) suggests that inclusion can be understood as:

…a concept that can be used to guide a process of strengthening the capacity of an education system to reach out to all learners in the community”, and as an overall principle to guide all educational policies and practices, “…starting from the belief that education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just society. (Ainscow, 2016, p. 145)

Contemporary interpretations of inclusion focus on four elements (Ainscow, 2015) that provide further opportunity to consider the place of children’s rights in education contexts. Inclusion is a process – a never-ending search to find better ways of responding to diversity. Children’s rights can be in the forefront of schools’ continuing work to improve learning opportunities and achievement for all children and young people. Inclusion is also concerned with the identification and removal of barriers. Schools can use evidence from a wide variety of sources, including the perspectives and experiences of students, to plan for improvements in policy and practice. As they review their policies and practice, schools can use a rights lens to ensure that new developments support children’s and young people’s rights. Finally, inclusion is about the presence, participation and achievement of all students. ‘Presence’ means welcoming all children into their local school, upholding their rights to attend and to receive a quality, inclusive education while they are there. ‘Participation’ relates to the quality of children’s and young people’s experiences at school and the extent to which they are fully involved alongside their peers in the culture, life and learning experiences of the classroom and wider school. In this regard, considerations of participation must incorporate Article 12’s intent to hear and respond to the views of the learners themselves.

Inclusion and te Tiriti o Waitangi

Inclusion in New Zealand is also understood within the broader framework of the Treaty of Waitangi (the foundational document signed in 1840 between Māori chiefs, and representatives of the British Crown). Three principles in the Treaty form the basis of government policies and programs in education and include partnership (acting towards each other reasonably and with good faith, sharing governance); protection of the rights of Māori to identify and define their natural resources, cultural institutions and language); and participation (enjoyment of all the rights and privileges of being a British citizen). Nonetheless, as signified by the UNCRC Committee’s Concluding Observations described above, government policies and programs may be helpful but much remains to be done to enact these policies and address the disparities that exist for Māori in education (Macfarlane, Macfarlane, Savage, & Glynn, 2012). Macfarlane et al. argue that schools could adopt paradigms of cultural affirmation that reinforce the integrity of the cultural knowledge students
bring with them, and assume culturally responsive pedagogies that draw on students’ culture to enhance culturally engaged learning. To be inclusive and to uphold the rights of children and young people who are Māori at school to have their culture affirmed, teachers themselves need to be culturally responsive, able to connect with culture while focusing on dialogic teaching and learning pedagogy while developing and extending their own levels of cultural competency.

In terms of cultural responsiveness, the ways in which space, voice, audience and influence are understood and responded to may vary depending on the context in which students grow up and are educated. Children’s rights to express their views, for example, may take on different forms and may look different in practice depending on understandings within cultures. In the bicultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi are guides for how this might play out. In her exploration of sociocultural contexts as enablers of inclusive practice, for example, Macfarlane (2015) suggests that the three principles that underpin the Treaty (partnership, protection and participation) provide moral, ethical and strategic impetus for enabling kaupapa Māori theory to be used in schools. The principles resonate strongly with Article 12 and can serve as a framework for initiating, planning and monitoring activities, as follows:

Partnership
- Māori are consulted and involved in decision-making about everything that affects them
- There are opportunities for both parties to listen to and learn from each other without one party imposing their own cultural views on the other

Protection
- Māori are able to bring their cultural knowledge, experiences, beliefs and values to the interactions
- Initial and ongoing interactions maintain and uphold Māori cultural knowledge, experiences, aspirations, beliefs and values.

Participation
- Māori have equitable access to contexts that reflect kaupapa Māori
- Content and contexts promote equitable rights, opportunities and outcomes for Māori (p. 107).

DEVELOPING RIGHTS-BASED, INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS

Strengthening Policy

In the United Kingdom, Ball (2010) has argued that if we want to explain persistent educational inequalities and address these through policy, then at the very least school reforms need to include a consideration of the impact of wider social and political factors, such as government policies that contribute to high levels of childhood poverty and exclusion.
What needs to be done in policy and practice to uphold children’s rights, to close some of the gaps and address the effects of inequity experienced by some children and young people at school (whether for reasons of disability and learning challenges, poverty, disciplinary actions and so on), are questions for all of the researchers contributing to this book.

**Strengthening Schools**

Where to pitch efforts for change, at schools or at the more fundamental inequalities in societies, remains a matter of discussion (Ainscow, 2015). On the basis of his work with local school districts in the same country, Ainscow (2016) advocates responding to learner diversity using an ‘ecology of equity, a position that considers changes within schools alongside efforts to change their local contexts:

> By this we mean that the extent to which students’ experiences and outcomes are equitable is not dependent only on the educational practices of their schools. Instead, it depends on a whole range of interacting processes that reach into the school from outside. These include the demographics of the areas served by schools, the histories and cultures of the populations who send (or fail to send) their children to the school, and the economic realities faced by those populations. (p. 148)

Strengthening schools so that they are able to respond to student diversity involves addressing three interconnected sets of factors that bear on the learning of children: within-school factors to do with existing policies and practices; between-school factors that arise from the characteristics of local school systems; and beyond-school factors, including the demographics, economics, cultures and histories of local areas.

Consistent with this ecological perspective, the UNCRC Committee’s Concluding Observations on New Zealand’s poor track record included a set of recommendations that provide a pathway for redressing underlying and enduring disparities faced by children and young people in this country. Their recommendations may be instructive in light of some of the experiences of children and young people described in this book, and include the implementation of an overarching child rights framework to guide decision-making processes, policy and legislation development, and service delivery and practice. In the case of Māori children the government has been reminded of its responsibilities to the principles enshrined in the Treaty of Waitangi. It is further suggested that professionals working for and with children, including teachers, be given training on their responsibilities under the UNCRC, with measures taken to ensure that discrimination against children in all sectors of society are effectively addressed. The report recommended that government:

> Invest considerable additional resources in order to ensure the right of all children from all disadvantaged, marginalized, and school-distant groups, to a
truly inclusive education. (Recommendation 45c) (and) … intensify its efforts to eliminate bullying and violence in schools, and promote inclusion through teaching human rights, peace and tolerance. (Recommendation 45f)

Disciplinary measures such as stand downs and exclusions should, the report noted, be a means of last resort only, with schools having ready access to professionals such as educational psychologists to help children at risk with their schooling. Overall the views of children were considered to be inadequately respected at school, with calls for legislation and practice that promotes, facilitates and implements the principle of respect for the views of the child within schools, as well as in families and the wider community.

Strengthening Student Voice at School

Schools can play a positive role in supporting children’s participation rights by creating opportunities for children to contribute their views; providing a school climate of respect for children’s opinions; taking children’s views seriously; and taking them into account in decision making (Smith, 2016). Beginning with the teacher in the classroom, Smith notes that “the way that teachers talk to children and whether they have a positive relationship with them, is a powerful aspect of school climate and one to which children are particularly sensitive” (p. 87). Formal school structures such as student councils also provide democratic and accountable policy forums, however it is critical that Article 12’s emphasis on action is not forgotten – children will become disappointed and cynical if nothing happens as a result of the consultation processes they are involved in.

Student voice is the common term used to describe the opportunities afforded to children and young people to express their views and share their perspectives about aspects of their schooling (Cook-Sather, 2006; Mitra, 2003; Bourke & Loveridge, 2014). Since education involves all children throughout their childhoods it is imperative that this context allows for access to voices, and that they are taken into account to ensure the best interests of children and young people at school. This move to give value to the voices of young people is happening in the context of the considerable power bases within education, that need to be deconstructed so that the former paternalistic slant of research, of speaking for others, is replaced by speaking with others (Fielding, 2004), and as partners in seeking greater understanding. Student voices have been relatively silent in research until recently but there has been an explosion of interest in students’ voices this century, albeit not always focused on improving children’s lives. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, research does need to be more firmly oriented towards gathering evidence on the impact that the rhetoric of children’s rights has in daily practice Reynaert, Bouverne-de Bie, and Vandevelde (2009). A lukewarm commitment to children’s rights and their day-to-day lives at school also suggests the need for a more solid commitment to access and act on students’ perspectives (Hopkins, 2010; Smith, 2016).
If children’s rights are to be upheld at school, children and teachers need to be aware of children’s rights. The United Nations and NGOs have played an important role in supporting a range of initiatives aimed at promoting the UNCRC in school contexts. UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools in the UK and Canada, and in some parts of New Zealand, promote children’s rights teaching, promoting and respect children’s rights in relation to the UNCRC, creating everyday opportunities for students to practice their rights in classrooms, schools and school communities (Phillips, 2016). Relationships between teachers and students, and amongst students model a respect for rights. Evaluations of the programme in 31 UK schools found that rights and responsibilities were more explicitly displayed throughout the school and in teaching practice, with a reduction in hierarchical power relations. Children engaged in more respectful, helpful relationships; they took more care with school property; described enjoying school more; and demonstrated improved critical thinking, self-regulation, motivation and achievement (Sebba & Robinson, 2010). Phillips has indicated, however, that the shackles of adult discipline were only partially loosened in that there remained some control by adults over what children could make decisions about, and there was a risk of teachers listening to children only when they said what teachers wanted to hear. Returning to Freeman’s (2007) point that rights are inextricably connected with children’s agency and participation, it behooves us to ensure that teachers are supported to understand the theoretical underpinnings of a rights-based approach to teaching practice and inclusive school development.

It is important also to recognize that there is no one homogenised ‘student voice’ in this domain; that “there are many voices to be heard in the ‘big story’ of inclusive schooling” (Moss, 2002, p. 231). Children’s experiences are heterogeneous and point to the influence of a range of factors in their lives, such as disability, ethnicity, gender and personality (MacArthur, Sharp, Kelly, & Gaffney, 2007). Kellock’s (2011) research into inclusion and wellbeing in a school in South Auckland for example, demonstrates how culture can powerfully support children’s school experience. Insights into children’s lives gained through an exploration of children’s photographs and narratives, provided a rich understanding of predominantly Māori students’ opinions, and highlighted the complex context within which the voices of 8–10 year olds were produced and heard. Children linked their school life strongly with the cultural heritage of the area, describing as central to their school lives the strong Māori values of whanau (extended family and friends); the importance of place (the school), and care (through relationships); and opportunities for creativity.

PERSPECTIVES – AUDIENCES, VOICES, METHODOLOGIES, IMPLICATIONS

Audiences and Authors

This book presents a range of perspectives on how to advance children’s rights and inclusive education. It is written for those who make decisions in education: teachers
and support teachers; school leaders; educational psychologists; members of Boards of Trustees; student teachers; policy makers and others working at various levels within education systems.

Most of the chapters are based on research in Aotearoa New Zealand, with the voices coming from both Pākehā and Māori. The other voices have British (Gilmore) and Australian accents (Graham & Berman; Margrain & Farrugia). All of the author groups are connected to Aotearoa New Zealand and Massey University. Student voices are mediated to an extent by the authors. Each chapter has been framed for a particular purpose, all aim to influence, to ensure that children’s and young people’s perspectives are taken into account, thus shaping better futures for children and young people in our schools. The implications for change are focused at multiple levels of the teaching and learning process – from the whole school, to classrooms, and to more intensive targeted interventions.

The authors are researchers, professionals, and parents who are used to being advocates for students, particularly for those who are marginalised by the education system, by teacher and community attitudes and by mismatched learning opportunities. In terms of methodology authors have tried to “find effective means of giving audience to all voices”, a process that involves ethical, political and methodological considerations (Cook, 2011, p. 316). These voices have the potential to contribute to breaking down assumptions (Carrington & Holm, 2005) and to supporting people to listen to and learn “from each other in new ways” thereby developing a “deeper level of respect for each other’s perspectives and … understanding of relationships and culture … that … [have] not been considered before” (Carrington, Allen, & Osmolowski, 2007, p. 13). They also support an alignment in how “others see [marginalised people] and how they see themselves” (Booth & Booth, 2003). Shedding new light, through different lenses, helps with clarity and shared understanding.

A Range of Student Voices

Readers will find represented in this book a range of children’s and young people’s perspectives, as well as the perspectives of some adults reflecting on children’s and young people’s lives at school, gleaned through their supportive relationships with each other. The voices in this book are predominantly from students of different ages, from school-aged children to adult students at university describing their learning journeys. Included here are:

- Kiwi kids talking about involvement in a wellbeing program at school
- Primary-age Korean international students talking about their wellbeing in an Auckland school
- Adolescents caught up in disciplinary procedures in schools, or excluded from schools, talking about quality of school life, belonging, participation and engagement
Responsive Methodologies

The involvement of adults as facilitators, supporting students to convey their views needs to be transparently considered to ensure that student voices are given appropriate spaces – and not just to have their voice authentically recorded, but also to ensure that their perspectives are responded to. Pearce and Wood (2016) remind researchers and teachers that the power relations inherent in accessing student voice need to be revealed through explicit definition of “who is speaking, where, how, why, to whom and to what ends” (p. 7).

All voices in our world are framed and filtered by others. Children’s voices are particularly shaped by the adults who hear them, and the purpose for which the voices are accessed. The researchers and authors in this volume have pursued two reasons for research in education, that is, to understand what is happening in student lives and to “improve educational provision and experience” for those students and others like them (O’Neill, 2014, p. 220). Thus, each of the research studies in this volume had a particular purpose that shaped the space for voices, and defined the audience and intended influence. All the authors were cognisant of the power that is inherent in accessing and interpreting student voices and have dealt with this responsibility in different ways.

Issues around the validity of the voices need to be resolved in the first place, since authentic voice is vital (Cook, 2011). Acknowledging the validity of students’ perceptions in the context of their own experiences is of particular importance when those experiences involve key environments for children, such as school.

Ethical imperatives were followed in the research studies reported on here, and careful decisions about how to gain informed consent were made. Such issues are not simple and require careful consideration of how researchers “enter the field and how they leave it” (Cowie, Otrel-Cass, & Morelan, 2010, p. 90). Instead of seeking active consent, which was the case in most studies, one study (Carroll-Lind) used passive consent whereby the rights of the students to express their views overrode the rights of the adults to protect them from the potential dangers of this opportunity. Such tensions between children’s rights and adult rights are perpetual in research and
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In education and are currently seen to be shaped by views of children as competent actors in their educational worlds (O’Neill, 2014).

There are many different ways to access the voices and perspectives of students, that reflect a belief that “students, given the chance, are thoughtful, fairminded and critical commentators on their learning and school experiences” (Cowie, Otrel-Cass, & Moreland, 2010, p. 91). You would think it was simple to ask students what they thought, how they felt and what they could suggest for making their schools and classrooms meet their needs. But this is a very complicated process. There is nothing simple about accessing voices, particularly from people who are inherently less powerful, such as students, most of whom are children. Researchers contributing to to the chapters in this book have provided space for student voice in a variety of ways, including through, asking questions, workbook activities, photography, kōrero and self-reflection in long term relationships, journals and also through family and school whanau who know the students well.

The traditional way to access student perceptions, thoughts and feelings is through questioning through questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. All of these methods have been used in the studies in this book, sometimes on their own and sometimes as part of a multi-method process. Self-report methods, such as interviews and questionnaires, ask respondents for direct information to gain their perspectives and is considered a legitimate and reliable data source for obtaining students’ voices in educational research (Barker, Pistrang, & Elliott, 2002; Fulmer & Frijters, 2009). Self-report studies have been criticised for potential validity problems associated with the subjective nature of individual judgement and the special meaning attached to events (Barker et al., 2002). Nonetheless, compared with studies that rely on parent and teacher reports, student self-report studies offer the most practical, ethical and anonymous approach for obtaining information because they are able to provide a more accurate representation of students’ accounts (Skiba, Simmons, Peterson, McKelvey, Forde, & Gallini, 2004). This issue is complicated for the students who have factors that interfere with them voicing their own thinking, such as cultural expectations, language differences, or speech language communication difficulties. ‘Workaround’ ways of accessing voice using less direct methodologies have at times been appropriate to ensure marginalised voices are accessed.

Implications of the Book

The conventional sense of steps suggested in the Lundy model (Figure 1) conveys a sophisticated and dynamic approach that blends student voice with its influence. By giving children opportunities to provide their views, researchers and teachers are at the same time intervening, and thus effecting change. For example, in recent literature, there is an increasing blurring of the purpose of photovoice as a way to access voices, and it becomes a tool of intended change. Since photovoice allows people to “re-imagine” or see things differently; to alter understanding and explore
possibilities for change (Iskander, 2015) it has potential for empowering (Shah, 2015). It is increasingly being used deliberately to empower (Blumenstock, Gupta, & Warren, 2015) and as a teaching tool (Cook & Quigley, 2013). This focus on voice as intervention or transformation recognises the agency of voice, that hearing the voice provides insights, and that it makes a difference.

In this book we celebrate student voice, and we agitate for the provision of spaces for students to be able to speak, to be heard and for their perspectives to be taken into account in educational decision making. It seems that the focus on student voice is part of a process of renegotiating power in relationships that are inherent in ako (teaching and learning) and in research. Where children and adolescents were once merely the objects of research, they are now partners in research, and in teaching and learning, and it is anticipated that they will be transformed by that process, just as they are transformed through learning. It is also hoped that their voices will be heard by others and will contribute to transformation of wider aspects of our constructed educational settings and activities.

Structure of the Book

In this first chapter we have shown how the UNCRC and the Salamanca Statement provide a foundation for rights-based, inclusive school systems that are designed for all students to fully participate in their communities and to learn well. The chapter has outlined how research can tap into student perspectives and experiences, highlighting both barriers and enablers to this goal. The following chapters will contribute to a better understanding of the ways in which schools might more deliberately work at the nexus of both children’s rights and inclusive education to meet the aims of these important international documents. These chapters are presented as a mosaic rather than as a sequence. Themes and topics may occur across several chapters but are not used as an organisational device. Chapters can therefore be dipped into according to interest and need.

In Chapter 2 Carroll-Lind positions students as experts on their school experience, providing insights into the culture and ethos of effective schools from a sample representative of New Zealand school students who reflect on their perceptions of violence and bullying. The theme of well-being is taken up again in Chapters 5 and 11.

In Chapter 3 Kearney and White examine the practice of school stand-downs through the narratives of two secondary school students. The students’ school experiences form the foundation for rethinking policy and practice that is respectful of students’ rights. A focus on the perspectives of adolescent students who have experienced disciplinary exclusion continues in Chapters 9 and 10.

In Chapter 4 Armstrong, MacArthur and Holley-Boen present the voice of a young student with a view to strengthening understanding of the ways schools can include students with complex needs. This theme is taken up again in Chapters 7 and 8.
In Chapter 5, Park, Berman, and Jackson examine what made school good for an elite group of international students from Korea who were participating as students in New Zealand schools. This continues a theme from Chapter 2.

In Chapter 6, Margrain and Farrugia present stories of the school journeys of disabled students through the eyes of these young people and their mothers (who are the authors). This theme continues in Chapters 7 and 8.

In Chapter 7, MacArthur, McIlroy, and Howard facilitate the voice of a young adult looking back at her school experiences. They illustrate how a responsive methodology can support a student to make sense of, build upon, and prioritise her teachers’ espoused values and practices to explain how these enhanced her learning and participation in an inclusive school. This theme continues in Chapter 8, in which Doell and Clendon provide their analysis of the process of teachers getting to know young students who have significant speech, language and communication needs. As language is the usual vehicle for student voice they have considered other indicators, mediated by those who know the students well, that give voice to these two young students’ lived experiences.

In Chapter 9, Fortier and Prochnow explore quality of school experiences from the perspective of excluded adolescents. This theme continues into Chapter 10, in which Gilmore explores the perspectives and experiences of students in a disciplinary space within the school.

In Chapter 11, Bourke et al. tap into the perspectives of students in who have participated in the My FRIENDS Youth programme to support student wellbeing. The experiences of students involved in school interventions are also examined in Chapter 12, where Graham and Berman explore the voices of Australian Aboriginal students who were involved in literacy intervention, to see what students thought about the experience of intensive literacy tuition, to gain insight into what role literacy played in their lives and also to strengthen connections between school and home.

In Chapter 13, Jackson explores how his student teachers accessed and used their students’ voices in their teaching, setting up expectations in new teachers that they need to respond to their students’ views in authentic and valid ways (Campbell, 2011).

To bring together all the ideas in this book, in Chapter 14, Holley-Boen, Graham, and Harré use Māori pōwhiri (welcome ceremony) as a way to think about teacher responsibility for setting up trusting relationships within which student voices are shared and responded to. The dynamic nature of voices that mutually influence each other is illustrated in the presentation of the authors’ reflections as Māori postgraduate students who are specialist teachers and lifelong learners.

In line with the metaphor of pōwhiri as a way for creating space and audience for voice, we welcome you, the audience, to the space we have created for these voices. We hope you can hear them clearly and that they have an influence on your work and life. The notion of making space for voice is one of the four in Lundy’s (2007) model and is pertinent to teachers, who have the power in the classrooms, and who
have a responsibility to welcome learners, to facilitate their voices, to hear them and take them into account in the educational decisions made every day.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Support for some for the projects reported on in this volume came from the Massey University Centre of Excellence for Research in Inclusive Education and Institute of Education.

We would also like to acknowledge the careful work of Chris Corbel, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, in the final stages of preparation.

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