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Inclusive Education

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Published in:

Malta Review of Educational Research

Publication date:

2017

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Calleja, C., Callus, A-M., Gauci, V., & Mercieca, D. (2017). Inclusive Education: listening to disabled students' voices. *Malta Review of Educational Research*, 11(2), 161-164.

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Special Issue

Inclusive Education: listening to disabled students' voices

Editorial

Colin Calleja, Anne-Marie Callus, Vickie Gauci and Duncan Mercieca

Inclusive education is about making sure that schools, colleges and universities, and the education systems within which they operate, cater for the individual educational needs of each and every student. It is about asking the question 'what do we need to do to accommodate this student's needs?'. For this special issue of the Malta Review of Education Research, we have sought answers to this question in relation to the inclusion of disabled students. More specifically, we have sought these answers from research carried out with disabled students themselves.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (United Nations 2006) determines the rights of disabled students in education. Article 24 sets out the details of these rights, establishing that non-discrimination and equal opportunity in the area of education requires 'an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning' (Article 24.1) and the provision of a quality and holistic education that enables disabled students to develop their potential to the maximum. Furthermore, these rights require the provision of reasonable accommodation that attends to disabled students' impairment-related needs, including Braille, sign language, augmentative and alternative forms of communication, and individualized support. Crucially, Article 24 also emphasizes the function of education to enable disabled students to attain a 'sense of dignity and self-worth' (Article 24.1(a)) and 'to participate effectively in a free society' (Article 24.1(c)).

Listening to disabled students' voices is important for various reasons. First of all, it helps us gauge how effective education systems are being in including them in a way that truly suits their needs, and in line with the requirements of Article 24. Input from educators and from parents is of course very important. However, while the opinions of these and other adults are frequently sought and their advice and decisions acted upon, the voices of disabled students tend to remain hidden, and so do their perspectives which can sometimes be surprisingly different from those of the adults working

with them. Very often disabled students, especially those who are still children, spend most of their time under adult surveillance, a situation which is not conducive to their being able to make their voice heard (Watson et al 1999). Secondly, enabling disabled students to talk about their experiences in education (as well as other aspects of life of course) should be seen as an integral part of that education. Having the opportunity to talk about one's life experiences and being able to reflect on them is essential to become adults who can participate effectively in a free society.

What then do disabled students have to tell us about their education? The papers included in this special issue provide us with some answers from various parts of the world – mostly from Malta itself, but also from Hungary, the United Kingdom, and Colombia. They also provide some answers about different levels of education – from primary school through to university; and answers about the inclusion of students with different impairments. These articles indicate that there is increased access to education at all levels for disabled students. But so much more needs to be done to achieve true inclusion, sometimes despite the efforts of well-intentioned educators and other adults. If these students were to write a report about their schools, colleges, universities, it would probably read 'Good effort, but needs to do much better'.

Pointers to how they can do better can be found in many ways including in what disabled students have to say. The article by Elvira Psaila shows us just how important it is to listen to their voices. Her research focuses on Alexander, a young boy with physical impairment in Malta. As Psaila herself remarks, the Alexander that his teacher and LSA describe seems to be a different boy from the image that Alexander projects of himself. Through her analysis, Psaila shows how the perspectives of the two educators on Alexander are embedded within notions of impairment as deficit and dependent on comparisons against pre-established norms, and why it is important to listen to and understand Alexander's own perspectives.

These norms are also the subject of analysis in the article by Plevin and Callus, which presents the perspectives of eight former students with intellectual disability on post-secondary vocational courses in Malta and their outcomes vis a vis employment. These students thrived in relatively sheltered educational settings that provided them with the support they needed, but found more open environments which do not have in-built support systems more challenging. The latter include most workplaces where needing support is seen as inimical to employability. But, as the authors argue, being a worker and needing support should not be seen as contradictory. Changes, therefore, need to be effected not only within education systems but at a wider societal level too.

Besides the support provided by educational institutions, disabled students also benefit greatly from supportive home environments and from being resilient themselves. The confluence of the various aspects of disabled students' 'ecosystems' is analysed in the article by Moreno-Angarita and Cárdenas-Jiménez. The authors present research carried out with four young disabled people in Colombia and focus not only on whether or not support was available at home and within educational systems, but also on the young people's own resilience. Highlighting this resilience foregrounds the agency that disabled students have over their own lives. In fact, evidence of resilience and agency can be found in the lives of all the disabled people who participated in the research presented in this special issue.

Resilience and agency need to be complemented by support of course. This support must be provided in many ways. Support in higher education is the subject of three articles in this special issue. Soorinen's research was carried out with thirty international disabled students in British universities. Much like Cárdenas-Jiménez and Moreno-Angarita's research participants, these students sometimes succeeded despite the system. Very often, these disabled students were expected to fit into already established systems, without those systems doing much to change in order to cater for their individual support needs. Soorinen comments that the difficulties encountered by her research participants are similar to those of British disabled university students. The fact that they had come over to study in Britain from different countries, and sometimes from very different cultures, compounded their difficulties.

As Marić argues in her article about inclusion in further and higher education (FHE), the values of inclusion need to be at the heart of education policy making and educational practice. This is true of education at all levels. In her discussion of narrative research she carried out with four young disabled people in Malta regarding their experiences in FHE, Marić makes the important point that listening to what students have to say about their individual educational experiences is crucial for policy-makers and practitioners alike. She argues that no two educational institutions will implement inclusive education in the same way and that various factors need to be considered, among them the school ethos and infrastructure. As Marić says, disabled students' own experiences is a very important factor that needs to be considered.

Listening to disabled students' voices need not always entail the formal process of conducting research with them but can also be done by finding out the issues that they discuss on a daily basis. This was the approach adopted by Flamisch and Hoffman who found out about the experiences of blind students in higher education in Hungary through an already-existing Facebook group. The perspectives of disabled students need to be trusted, as these authors say. It was the feeling of not being trusted and listened to that

motivated the creation of this group which, although it is closed to members, can be joined by anyone interested in the inclusion of people with visual impairment in Hungary. Listening to disabled students' voices can therefore help bring down barriers not only through identifying obstacles to effective inclusion in education but also by challenging the stereotype of disabled people as being incapable of speaking about their needs.

Listening to disabled students' voices and giving them their due importance does not mean that the voices of parents, educators, and academics are discounted. Our special issue in fact starts with an interview that Elena Tanti Burlò, from the University of Malta, carried out with Salvatore Soresi and Laura Nota from the University of Padova in Italy. Inclusion, as Soresi and Nota tell us, is for all students, and all educators should strive to achieve it without any 'ifs and buts'. Achieving inclusion can present difficulties but these should be seen not so much as obstacles but as challenges that, once overcome, will create better educational systems for one and all. The creation of such systems is not achieved once and for all, but is an ongoing process of adaptation and change. And knowing what needs to be adapted and changed depends, among other things, on listening to what disabled students have to say about their experiences of education.

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