

**Amelie Thompson**

**Why ‘inclusion’ must include the learner’s ‘voice’. A case study of three Afghanistani siblings ‘included’ in the mainstream Austrian school system.**

Marginalization and exclusion can have many roots. My research focused on three Afghanistani siblings who had arrived in Austria about a year ago and had been ‘included’ into a mainstream school. The children attended the same school and were aged 13 (Leila), 15 (Shakila) and 16 (Wakil) [*names have been anonymised*]. The research focused on *their* perception of their school and learning experiences. It investigated their experiences in different places in the school environment, at different school times, and their general feelings about going to school. The research project not only reported on the ‘inclusive/exclusive’ practices which they were experiencing, but also highlighted their mature, ambitious and very pragmatic approach to the whole project also highlighted why debates surrounding inclusion are of utmost importance, and why learners’ ‘voices’ need to play a key role within this debate.

To briefly summarise, from the activities and open-ended interviews completed with the three siblings emerged six main themes, which appeared to be the deciding factors on whether they felt ‘included/excluded’ within school life:

- social participation (how accepted they felt by their fellow classmates, friendships, interaction with fellow classmates...)
- lesson participation (whether they felt like ‘guests’ or like ‘real’ pupils in the lessons)
- the effects of the language barrier
- academic support and teachers’ attitudes
- academic achievement
- their own personal role in their exclusion.

These six themes were emphasised differently by all three siblings and the differences in their experiences highlighted varied perceptions of ‘inclusion/exclusion’.

These six main themes are essential indicators of what these three teenagers consider to be vital for their successful ‘inclusion’. Yet, perhaps more significantly for the general debate on ‘inclusion’, my research with them underlined the importance of giving learners a ‘voice’ and negotiating their education with them.

A discrepancy between the school's perceptions of the siblings' 'inclusion' and their own perception of it became apparent. The school, to a certain extent, believed that their 'inclusion' was a matter of time, that the language barrier was the greatest problem and that, although they perhaps didn't have many friends, they had the potential to be socially integrated. On the other hand, Wakil and Shakila highlighted social participation (or lack of it) as a key factor in their feelings of 'exclusion' and also partly as an explanation for their inability to make necessary language and academic progress. The school did not overlook these pupils but, as everybody's, their perceptions were subjective. Important resources can be put to waste if the learner's 'voice' is not taken into consideration and such misunderstandings and misconceptions are allowed to take root. More importantly, through such misconceptions taking root, learners lose certain rights to a complete education.

These three teenagers want to learn, they want to achieve, but, in their own words, 'they don't know how'. They have great and unselfish ambitions. For example, Wakil wants to go to school so that he can do something for his home country (Afghanistan) in the future. His success, along with the success of others, is surely in the best interests of all. They have a right to fulfil these ambitions.

However, this is not only about a rights-based discourse. The research also calls for our responsibility as educators and as humans. Wakil and Shakila (Leila expressed greater experience of 'inclusion' than her two older siblings) showed signs of "internalize[d] negative representations...[and] low self-esteem" (Valentine et al., p.78) and also demonstrated a need for recognition. This project has begun a process, which will hopefully continue. This project allowed their 'voices' to be heard and they were very keen to assert their rights as learners.

... individuals who have experienced oppression or exclusion are most likely to achieve greater esteem when they are enabled to gain recognition through self-expression. (Rose and Shevlin, p.156)

They thoroughly enjoyed working on this project and it would appear that the opportunity for 'self-expression' has empowered them as learners. They encouraged me to discuss their 'voices' with their head and form teacher, with whom a very effective dialogue has now been established. As a result, they are now saying that they feel more confident, for example, to ask their teachers for help.

These three siblings were superb respondents, who viewed their situation pragmatically and maturely. All three presented their 'inclusion' as an interactive process in which they were also very much involved. This highlighted not only why it is so important to listen to the learner's perspectives but also that there is no reason to fear consulting learners in the process of 'education'-planning. In fact, these three

children were more than willing to accept and take on different viewpoints, a willingness that we as educators could possibly learn from!

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