Learning from differences: a strategy for teacher development in respect to student diversity

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Abstract

Drawing on evidence gathered as a result of collaborative action research carried out in eight secondary schools in three European countries, this paper proposes an innovative strategy for helping teachers respond positively to learner diversity. The strategy merges the idea of lesson study with an emphasis on listening to the views of students. The research suggests that it is this latter emphasis that makes the difference as far as responding to learner diversity is concerned. It is this that brings a critical edge to the process that has the potential to challenge teachers to go beyond the sharing of existing practices in order to invent new possibilities for engaging students in their lessons. The paper also considers some of the difficulties involved in using this strategy.

Key words: diversity; action research; teacher development; students voices

Adina is 15 and goes to school in Madrid. Her family recently moved there from Eastern Europe. Although she is keen to do well at school, she finds it difficult since she is still at the early stages of learning to speak Spanish.

Although he understands most of what is said, Peter, a 14 year old student in a Manchester school, never speaks. He mainly communicates with his friends through text messages.

Teresa is a 17 year-old girl who has grown up on a poor social housing estate on the outskirts of Lisbon. She is working hard to go to university but there is nowhere in her family's apartment where she can do her homework.

These three children are examples of the many differences that are typically found in classrooms across Europe. The task of teachers is to make sure that their lessons take

account of their differences, recognising that they provide opportunities for making their lessons more effective for all members of the class (Council of Europe, 2004). Increased population movement between countries has added to the urgency of this issue, with schools in most countries admitting more young people with ethnic, cultural and linguistic differences (Corak, 2004). In addition to this, there is widespread concern regarding the progress of students from economically poor backgrounds who tend to lose out most starkly, achieve the worst results and attend the lowest performing schools (Perry & Francis, 2010). All of this signals the multiple complexities teachers face when working in classrooms with layers of difference amongst the student body.

This paper presents the findings of a three-year project - '*Responding to diversity by engaging with students' voices*' - that addresses this crucial agenda.[1] It involved two cycles of collaborative action research carried out by teams of teachers and researchers in three countries (i.e. England, Portugal and Spain) that led to the creation of what we see as an innovative strategy for teacher development. This aims to support teachers in developing inclusive classroom practices by engaging with the views of students. Based on findings from our earlier work (see Messiou, 2012a;2012b), we saw how students' voices can stimulate thinking in schools and we wanted to explore in more detail the ways in which they can contribute to teacher professional development.

In what follows, we provide an account of the project in order to explain and justify the strategy that emerged, and its conceptual basis. We also consider some of the difficulties involved in using the strategy in order to link with wider concerns regarding school improvement.

Inclusive education
In planning the study we wanted to explore how obvious differences amongst learners, as well as more nuanced ones, can facilitate the development of more inclusive practices. The theme of inclusion in education has become a focus for considerable activity in recent years. Internationally, inclusive education is still largely thought of as an approach to serving children with disabilities within general education settings (Ainscow, 2012;Echeita, 2013). However, it is increasingly seen more broadly as a reform that responds to diversity amongst all learners (UNESCO, 2009). The argument developed in this paper adopts this broader formulation. It presumes that the aim of inclusive school improvement is to eliminate exclusionary processes from education that are a consequence of attitudes and responses to diversity in relation to race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and attainment, as well as with regards to disabilities. As such, it starts from the belief that education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just society. It has also been argued that teacher development is a key factor in making this happen (Villegas-Reimers, 2003)

This thinking was endorsed by the UNESCO Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education, 1994, which argued that regular schools with an inclusive orientation are 'the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all'(p.ix). Furthermore, it

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[1] European Union Comenius Multilateral Project, 2011-14

suggests that such schools can 'provide an effective education for the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system'(p.ix). More recently, this formulation was refined as a basis for the conceptual framework of the 48th session of the International Conference on Education, held in 2008, and attended by Ministers of Education and officials from 153 countries (Ainscow & Miles, 2008).

It has been argued that the use of this way of thinking will be much more likely if it is recognised that difficulties experienced by students result from the ways in which schools are currently organised and from the forms of teaching that are provided (Ainscow, 1999; Dyson & Millward, 2000; Skrtic, 1991). This builds on the idea that difficulties in education can be explained in terms of two competing perspectives (Skrtic, 1986). The first of these perspectives is where difficulties are interpreted in terms of the individual characteristics of the learners, leading to what is sometimes referred to as a deficit view of some students (Trent, Artiles & Englert, 1998). The second perspective has been described by Clark, Dyson, Millward & Skidmore. (1995) as an 'organisational paradigm'. This explains difficulties in terms of factors in the context in which learning is intended to occur. In this way, attention is focused on features within schools that facilitate responses towards diversity. Consequently, it is argued, schools have to be reformed and pedagogy improved in ways that will lead them to respond positively to learner diversity – seeing individual differences not as problems to be fixed, but as opportunities for enriching learning. Within such a conceptualisation, a consideration of difficulties experienced by students provides an agenda for reform and insights as to how such reforms might be brought about (Hart, 1996).

We believe that the project reported in this paper makes a significant contribution to the implementation of this alternative thinking in schools. Specifically, it does this by developing a strategy that helps teachers to see the value of student differences as a source of professional development. The strategy involves four interacting processes that are described later and refers to professional development as "a long term process that involves regular opportunities and experiences planned systematically to promote growth and development" (Villegas-Reimers, 2003, p.12). The fact that the strategy developed was prepared in close collaboration with practitioners and students in three countries is a further innovative element, leading us to argue that it is relevant across national borders. The research process involved networking and sharing of experiences between the partner schools, building on our experience of previous projects that had demonstrated the power of such collaborative social learning processes (Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick & West, 2012). Specifically, this makes use of differences as a means of stimulating new ways of thinking about challenging problems.

Starting points
The approach developed within the project was built around the lessons of a programme of research carried out, individually and collectively, by members of our team over the last twenty years or so. This includes a UNESCO teacher education project that led to the dissemination of a resource pack in over 80 countries (Ainscow, 1999). This experience threw light on how the task of helping teachers to respond to learner diversity might be best conceptualised. This thinking was further developed in the form of the *Index for Inclusion*, a review instrument that enables a school to draw

on the views of staff, students and parents in order to move policy and practices forward (Booth & Ainsow, 2011).

Our earlier research had revealed how the use of evidence can help to create space for reappraisal and rethinking by interrupting existing discourses, and by focusing attention on overlooked possibilities for moving practice forward (Ainsow, Howes, Farrell & Frankham, 2003; Miles & Ainsow, 2011). We found that a particularly powerful technique in this respect involves the use of evidence collected from students about teaching and learning arrangements within a school (Ainsow & Kaplan, 2006; Messiou, 2003; 2006a; 2006b; Parrilla, Martínez & Zabalza, 2012; Sandoval, 2011). More specifically, earlier research had led the development of a framework for using learner voices in order to address marginalisation in schools (Messiou, 2012a; 2012b). This framework involves: 1. Opening doors: enabling voices to emerge; 2. Looking closely: bringing concerns to the surface; 3. Making sense of the evidence: sharing data with learners; and 4. Dealing with marginalisation: encouraging inclusive thinking and practice. This framework provides a means of moving away from simply seeing students as sources of information in order that they are able to take on more active roles.

In addition, we had experience of using the idea of lesson study, a systematic procedure for the development of teaching that is well established in Japan and several other Asian countries (Hiebert, Gallimore & Stigler, 2002; Lewis, Perry, & Murata, 2006; Pérez Gómez & Soto, 2011). It involves teachers within a school, or across a group of schools, working in threes to strengthen teaching and learning. Each trio chooses and plans one lesson - known as the 'research lesson' - that they will each teach. The aim is to share expertise as to how to involve all members of the class. As each member of staff teaches the lesson, their two colleagues observe the process, focusing specifically on the way students respond. After each lesson the trio plan ways of improving the lesson before it is taught again.

From these earlier experiences a series of working propositions had emerged that we wanted to test out through the project. These were as follows:

1. Evidence collected within a school can create spaces for reappraisal and rethinking by interrupting existing discourses

2. Such approaches help to make the familiar unfamiliar in ways that stimulate self-questioning, creativity and action.

3. The views of students about teaching and learning arrangements within a school are a powerful form of interruption.

4. Differences of view amongst students (and staff) are a catalyst for change

With these ideas in mind, the framework developed by Messiou was combined with the lesson study approach in order to develop an initial formulation for the project**.** In particular, we noticed that usually the lesson study approach relies entirely on the views of teachers, taking no account of what the students think (Lewis, Perry, & Murata, 2006). However, our earlier work had led us to believe that engaging with the views of students can be a powerful source of making teachers think in alternative

ways.   This builds on the work of other researchers who have explored how students' views can facilitate teacher development (e.g. McIntyre, Pedder & Rudduck, 2005; Flutter, 2007; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000) We, therefore, wanted to explore this idea in more detail and, in so doing, see whether engaging with the views of students does indeed lead to powerful professional development of teachers.

Bearing all this in mind, our overarching research question was: *How can teachers develop more inclusive practices by engaging with the views of students?* In addition, we were interested in exploring the complexities associated with addressing this agenda in schools.

Methodology
The project involved two cycles of collaborative action research carried out by teams of teachers and researchers in eight secondary schools, in cities in the three countries (i.e. Hull, Lisbon, Madrid and Manchester). The schools were chosen because of the exceptional diversity of their student populations. Using an evolving framework to guide their efforts, each team experimented with ways of collecting and engaging with the views of students in order to foster the development of more inclusive classroom practices.

External researchers from the partner universities (i.e. Algarve, Autonoma Madrid, Hull, Manchester and Southampton) provided training and support for the school teams. In so doing, they used processes of collaborative action research to explore and develop various approaches to capture the views of students. At the same time, the researchers monitored developments in the schools through observations and interviews in order to identify ways in which these processes led to changes in thinking and the introduction of inclusive practices amongst the teachers.

Elliot (1991) defines action research as *'the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it'* (p.69, original emphasis). This was our starting point and guided our epistemological decisions. It led us to look for some means of structuring the process that would be helpful for our school partners. As a result, in collaboration with the schools, we developed the following framework of seven overlapping steps to guide the first cycle of action research:

Step 1. Form a working group. Each school forms a group of three teachers who work together to explore ways of using the views of students to stimulate attempts to cater for diversity within lessons. Trios may be made up of teachers who teach the same subject or, alternatively, the same age group.

Step 2. Analyse diversity in the school. Before planning the action research they intend to carry out in their classrooms, the participating teachers spend time discussing their views about diversity amongst students in the school. In so doing they take note of their varied perceptions, each of which will be helpful in thinking about the diversity that exists

Step 3. Collect the views of students. In order to take this process of analysis further, the trio of teachers spend time engaging with the views of their students. Here the focus is on how far students feel that their differences are understood, valued and

utilised during lessons. Students are also asked to explain classroom practices and activities that make them feel included.

Step 4. Plan research lessons. Keeping in mind the discussions that have taken place - particularly the views of the students – the trios of teachers agree a focus for their classroom research. This involves one lesson that is planned collaboratively (known as the research lesson) and then taught by each colleague in turn, with their two colleagues observing. In planning the research lesson, the teachers share their ideas as to how the lesson can be made effective for every member of the class.

Step 5. Teach the research lessons. As each colleague teaches the research lesson the other two teachers observe the responses of members of the class.   Their focus is on the extent to which students are engaged in lesson activities and the ways in which they contribute. After the lesson is taught, and while it is still fresh in everybody's minds, the group meet to discuss and analyse what happened. The group then make adjustments to the lesson plan before it is taught by the next member of the trio.

Step 6. Interview students. As soon as possible after each research lesson, some of the students are interviewed in order to get their reactions to the lesson. In some instances, these investigations are carried out by school students, who receive some training in research methods.

Step 7. Identify implications for practice. Once each teacher has taught the research lesson, the trio spend time analysing the information they have collected through their meetings, observations and interviews with students. The aim at this stage is to make a record of what has been learnt about responding to student diversity.

It was stressed that colleagues were free to adapt these suggestions to fit in with the situation within their schools. As the steps were carried out, the university partners supported their school colleagues in keeping brief records of what happens. In this way, material was collected as the research was carried out in order to prepare accounts of practice.

These accounts were analysed at a meeting of all the partners in order to prepare for the second cycle of action research.   As a result of the discussions that took place, the framework was further refined in a way that was intended to make it easier to use. This new formulation, which attempted to permeate the idea of engaging with the views of students throughout the process, now involved four overlapping steps, as follows:

1. Form research groups
2. Discuss diversity, learning and teaching
3. Plan, teach and analyse research lessons
4. Identify implications for future practice

Colleagues were again encouraged to adapt this suggestion to fit in with the situation within their schools, always keeping in mind the central idea of engaging with the views of students in order to respond to learner diversity.

In thinking about the way we evaluated the two action research cycles, it was important to keep in mind the overall purpose of the project. This was *to develop*

strategies and materials for teacher development that have been demonstrated to be effective, plus guidelines that indicate how these approaches should be used. Based on evaluation strategies found to be effective in previous projects that had involved similar types of collaborative action research (e.g. Ainscow, 1999; Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006; Vitorino, Paes, Antunes, Cunha, Cochito, Gonçalves & Limpinho, 2006), a number of strategies were used. These set out to take advantage of differences as a means of interpreting common experiences from a variety of perspectives. More specifically, they involved:

- Comparing and contrasting evidence about the same activities from different people (for example, teachers, support staff and students);
- Scrutinising events from different angles by making use of a variety of methods for collecting information; and
- Using 'outsiders' as observers (i.e. the university researchers).

Throughout both cycles, the researchers from the universities were in regular contact with their practitioner colleagues. In this way they helped to collect evidence of various forms, including observation reports, summaries of meetings, lesson plans and materials, and video recordings. This was not to evaluate the quality of the teaching. Rather, it was to report what was happening in ways that encouraged everybody involved, including the external observers, to reflect on what they were learning.

Together, these varied materials again provided the basis of a series of written accounts of the work carried out in each of the schools, including alternative explanations as to what lessons might be drawn from these experiences. In this way we were able to draw conclusions that we believe to be both valid and relevant.

Accounts of practice
In order to give readers a sense of the different ways things developed within the schools, we now provide three brief examples.

(i) **Changing practices** – Some of the teacher trios focused on organizational issues that they felt influenced responses to learner diversity. For example, a group of modern languages teachers carried out a series of lessons that looked at seating arrangements in their classrooms. This focus emerged from listening to the ideas of a group of student researchers who had gathered the views of other young people in order to identify their preferences about seating arrangements and how these impact on their learning.

Previously, all three teachers had their students seating in a horseshoe shape, with a few tables in the middle. As a result of the students' feedback, each decided to experiment with a different arrangement. One kept the big horseshoe shape, but chose not to have tables in the middle, so she could move around easily from inside. The second teacher chose to arrange the tables in groups and allow students to decide with whom they sat. The third teacher put the students in rows and gave out post-it notes in the class so that individuals could choose their neighbours. Interestingly, there was one student who did not want to sit next to anyone - the teacher respected this and allowed him to sit on his own.

As these different approaches were trialed, each of the lessons was observed by the other teachers in the trio. Then, at the end of each lesson, the student researchers gathered feedback from class members by giving out questionnaires and carrying out interviews with some of the participants in the lessons. This feedback was used to refine the next lesson.

What was interesting was the impact that these relatively simple experiments had on teachers' practices and thinking, as well as on their students. For example, the teacher who used groups was encouraged to reflect upon the importance of students learning a second language feeling comfortable:

'I found the kids were more comfortable in groups. I think in languages lessons they need to feel comfortable when you are speaking. Because of the embarrassment factor, you have to be self conscious about how you sound. And I think when you are working with someone that you feel comfortable with you will relax more, you'll engage more, you will participate more. And I think being able to choose who you sat beside, made it so much easier. And I've kept it like that, though usually I have a rigid seating arrangement, now I put the emphasis on them...... They feel that they have been treated more like adults and their opinions have been taken into account. So, in that respect it has been very beneficial'

Sometimes, the experiments led to surprises, as in the case of the teacher who chose rows:

'I was quite amazed how students who never put their hand up, they were much more willing to participate. I don't know if it is the fact that because they are next to their friends they are not worried of giving an answer, they've got that confidence. So, I have tried that with other classes, because I have got other classes with some pupils who are very quiet. Especially with one class that I have lots of quiet girls and lots of rowdy lads and sitting them next to a friend has enabled them to participate more and put their hands up more, which is really nice to see, so I am going to try this with other classes.'

Meanwhile, students themselves felt that they had benefited through this process. For example:

'I am quite tall and my name starts with C. And because my teacher asks us to sit in alphabetical order, I am always sat in front of people and they are complaining. Because teachers think that generally it is easier to do an alphabetical seating plan, but we thought if we could do a practical one would affect our learning, the ones at the back can also see the board.'

'It was our opinion who to sit next to, so we knew we could get on with our work. And it was good because we got to help one another and people did not get stuck'.

Some students also valued opportunities to play a more active role:

'We made a lot of difference to a lot of people. By sitting next to who they like the behaviour was better.'

'I feel happy that the teachers listened to the children for a change'

(ii) **Planning together**. Some trios went beyond the idea of simply listening to the views of students. For example, following the work they had done together during the first cycle of action research, a group of teachers in another school chose to explore the participation of students in the process of lesson planning. A member of the group explained:

'Last year we liked the experience of the trio and we decided to continue the experience. Last year, because we were dealing with a new model, we had to build everything from the beginning. The fact the study lesson experience made us feel more at ease to take the risk of a partnership teaching with the students this year, but changing a bit the proposed model. Our focus was students' participation in lesson planning. We met with a group of students from each of the classes in order to plan a lesson related to a theme suggested by us. They participated in the whole process.'

The theme addressed in the lessons was 'vocations and professions'. Students were chosen to take part in the planning with the idea of diversity in mind (e.g. motivation, language skills, behaviour, personality, gender). They were presented with a set of subtopics in the form of a 'menu'. The intention was that this would provide a working basis for the students, whilst ensuring that the teachers retained some control concerning the lesson content. So that these students would feel truly involved, the teachers respected their choices regarding the subtopics and accepted their suggestions for activities to be used during the lessons.

Following the meeting with the students, the trio of teachers held a further discussion and agreed that the suggestions of their students were very helpful. As a result, they designed the final plan for their lesson, integrating the activities that had been suggested. It was also agreed that the group of students would be interviewed following each iteration of the lesson.

After the first of the three lessons, the teachers felt the need to introduce some changes. Subsequently, from lesson two to lesson three, they made further adjustments. Through these changes, they attempted to maximize the participation of all of their students, whilst, at the same time, responding to their wishes expressed in the interviews carried out after each lesson. One of the teachers explained what happened:

'We went on making adjustments from lesson to lesson. For instance, first we had formed the small groups as a result of a personality test that we had made in the classes. But there was a need to reformulate them for the second lesson in order to get a better balance.'

Going into more detail, she explained what this meant for her:

'Regarding the third lesson, I formed the groups based on our observations. I tried to form more heterogeneous groups, because we had noticed that there were groups where the students showed great difficulties in understanding the instructions. And I chose five leaders, one for each group. Some students were not happy with the new groups. So, in the whole process, take into account students' ideas but not at this level. We had to consider their diversity.'

After finishing the three lessons, the trio met again to make the assessment of the experience and analyze the statements of the students during the interviews. They

noted that students were particularly fond of the group tasks, since these encouraged mutual support, overcoming difficulties, and a sense of security.

As in our first example, students in this school also liked to participate in the preparation of lessons and give suggestions that were implemented. Examples of student comments included:

'I like to be one of those that helped organize the lesson because if someone in my group did not know something I would help.'

'I enjoyed to be a leader and also because I participated in all the tasks'

'It is more interesting if we can give ideas ... because we know teacher's and our classmates' opinion.'

'I liked it because it is easier for the teacher to plan a lesson with students' opinions.'

'Everyone in the group had to participate, and the fact that I was the leader really helped.'

The teachers themselves argued that their participation in this research cycle was extremely enriching. For them, it seemed, diversity now presented itself as an opportunity, particularly when approached through collaborative ways of working. They also concluded that the involvement of students in lesson preparation is both possible and desirable.

(iii) **Mutual challenge** – Inevitably, the depths of discussion within the teachers' trios varied considerably. An example of a trio that matured in this respect involved three teachers of English. In planning their joint lesson they identified students within each of their classes who they saw as being particularly vulnerable. They felt that by thinking about the lesson with these individuals in mind they might create new and different ways of facilitating the learning of all of their students. So for example, one teacher talked about a student who had an understanding of language but would not speak, even when invited. Another teacher focused on one of his students who had severe dyslexia. This led the teachers to discuss how they might plan their lessons differently; for example, they talked about getting the students to write on the whiteboard, and getting students to rehearse verbally what they wanted to say, rather than writing arguments down.

In addition, the trio decided that they needed to work with some of their students before teaching the lessons to get an idea of how they preferred to learn. They also wanted to consider how best to plan the lesson to support the many differences amongst the students. They therefore selected seven students, each from a different ethnic background. Six of them were born outside the country. The teachers got these students together at lunchtime and asked them to rank their preferences regarding different classroom activities that can be used when studying poetry. As a result of these discussions, they decided that they as teachers would have minimal input into the activity. One of the teachers explained:

'Initially, they were quite reluctant to perhaps voice an opinion that they thought we wouldn't like.... We stepped back for a bit and just left the recording device on the table and let them talk about what they liked and what they didn't like, because if we're not imposing our views on them, they were more likely to be honest.'

Again, in this case there were surprises. The teacher explained that although the students' initial responses were much as they had expected, their comments became less so as the discussion continued:

'At first the students did the obvious and were quick to give their opinions, i.e. put "teacher talking and copying off the whiteboard" at the bottom of the list, and "getting up and being active" at the top. However, as they started to rank the other approaches their reasoning became more nuanced and they started to move their rankings around. Drama remained high but some of the others were not so clear.'

This activity encouraged the teachers to think about what they referred to as the 'majority versus the individual' dilemma:

'I guess the one thing that you learn is that if you're getting the students' opinions you can't take everybody's opinion on board, even if you wanted to. Some people were independent learners, some people were better in a group. So, I think it just reconfirmed to us that we needed to make sure that there were a variety of different kinds of activities for them to do.'

The overall aim of the lesson that was planned was to develop confidence in and awareness of a variety of dramatic techniques. Each teacher taught the lesson with their colleagues watching, making changes in the light of the regular discussions that took place as they proceeded. It was noticeable that, as in our other two examples, these became increasingly focused on matters of detail and, as a result, led to a greater emphasis on mutual challenge and personal reflection. For example, after one of the lessons, a conversation took place during which two teachers were heard thinking aloud about their own ways of working as a result of watching their colleague:

Teacher 1: *'I thought it was noisy. I knew it was OK, but I felt a bit uncomfortable with it, as I can't imagine having the same level of noise in my class and being in control. I'm not sure I could let them go like that.'*

Teacher 2: *'You can tell you've (Teacher 3) done a lot of group work with your class. You've built up that relationship of letting them work more autonomously over time so it's not just a one off.'*

Teacher 1: *'I would structure my lesson more. You gave them both tasks together. You did not really go through them before the lesson started but circulated among them when they were doing their first task, drama features, to check they were OK for the second task. I'd divide it into two tasks, the first being carrying out the dramatic feature, and then the second one being the one where they reflect on what the important aspects are of each feature of drama. I would do one task, then stop them all and bring them back to me, and then I'd tell them what to do for the second task. I might be doing them a disservice but I don't think they could cope. Or maybe I just want to feel in control.'*

Teacher 2: *'It really surprised me how they just got on and read their packs of information in their groups. I'm envious. What surprised me was the way you were able to give them instructions and rely on them to read through them. You have obviously been teaching them to be autonomous.'*

All of this led on to a consideration of the different teaching styles used by the members of the trio:

Teacher 1: *'I think (teacher 3) has got a very calm style. It rubs off on the kids. I watched how she circulated round the class. That calm style wouldn't work with my group, or is that the way we've moulded them? They're a lot lower ability and it takes a lot of energy to get them to put pen to paper. There are a lot of behavioural issues. I feel shattered at the end. If I was calmer perhaps they would mellow? I would be nervous about my students being able to be so independent. You didn't quite tell them everything they needed to do. My students couldn't do that, or maybe it's about my expectations of my student? It's partly to do with who the students are but it's also to do with expectations.'*

The conversation went on to consider ways of mobilising the sometimes hidden strengths amongst the students:

Teacher 2: *'I also liked the way you chose leaders for each of the groups. You chose people who you knew would be confident to lead the groups.'*

Teacher 1: *'We don't draw on their strengths enough. Take for example Student Y, he is low in everything but he runs for the city. Student X is very involved in the cadets, perhaps he would be good at leading this activity. Just because he is not very good in English doesn't mean we can't draw from their strengths in other areas.'*

Teacher 2: *'I don't really know what makes them tick, what groups or clubs they belong to, what gets them going. We've got to show that they are good at something and draw on their strengths.'*

By the end of the process the three teachers all commented that they had been challenged to rethink their lesson planning and facilitation. Through this, they realised that new approaches gave members of the class the opportunities to learn out of their 'comfort zones' and, in so doing, move beyond the teachers' expectations about the capabilities of their students.

Drawing out the lessons

As the work in the eight schools developed through the two cycles of action research we were able to detect certain overall patterns that helped us to formulate and then refine the basis of the strategy we are now recommending. To a large extent, this confirmed the working propositions we had formulated early on in the project. In particular, we gathered evidence confirming that, under the right circumstances, the views of students *can* help us to be more sensitive to issues of diversity. We also saw how this can this can stimulate developments in practice that will make lessons more inclusive. At the same time, we were made very aware of challenges that are involved when trying to make this happen within the realities of day-to-day life in schools.

Our analysis of the experiences of the eight project schools led us to conceptualise a strategy for teacher development in respect to student diversity. This involves four interacting processes (see Figure 1). As indicated by the arrows, we see the four processes as interacting, rather than as a series of steps to be followed. So, for

example, 'talking about diversity' is something that is intended to occur whilst 'developing inclusive practices' and 'learning from experiences'. In this context, the different views of colleagues can act as a stimulus for reflection.

Add Figure 1 here

Central to the strategy, however, is the idea of engaging with the views of students, a process that should permeate all the processes involved and, as we have seen, can take many forms. Our research suggests that it is this factor, more than anything else, that makes the difference as far as responding to learner diversity is concerned. In particular, it is this that brings a critical edge to the process that has the potential to challenge teachers to go beyond the sharing of existing practices in order to invent new possibilities for engaging students in their lessons, as we saw in each of our three examples. Where such changes take place, it is useful to think of them as the result of an interruption to continuing thinking and practice which brings about a transformation from 'single-loop' to 'double-loop' learning (Argyris & Schon 1996); that is, from learning which enables practice to be improved incrementally, to learning which shifts the assumptions on which practice is based.

We saw, in particular, how the processes involved sometimes led teachers to reconsider their ideas regarding learner diversity, particularly in respect to the ways in which differences are formulated and described. Within the project, there was evidence of three ways of thinking. These were:

> **1. Adopting categories:** At the outset of the project, many of the teachers involved tended to rely on the formal categories that are used in schools to describe the different groups of students that exist. These include: age, gender, ethnicity, language status, socio-economic background, level of attendance, and special educational needs status. In addition, data from testing led some schools to group learners in terms of their levels of attainment and progress made. A potential danger in all of this is that a category label used to define a particular group of learners may limit awareness of individuality. For example, in some schools the commendable preoccupation with improving the achievement of students from disadvantaged backgrounds tended to lead teachers to overlook the fact that some of these learners were, in practice, doing very well.

> **2. Creating categories:** We also had many examples of another level of grouping that was referred to, which arises from teachers' perceptions and interpretations of certain groups of learners. In this way, new, less formal categories are created within particular schools. Often these relate to assumptions about presumed capacity to learn, as expressed in phrases such as 'high', 'middle' and 'low ability'. In one school, for example, the teachers focused attention on students referred to as 'Miss Averages'. Staff in another school saw a group of students transferred together from another school that had closed as being members of a discreet category. Sometimes, students were also described in terms of their overall response to life in schools through terms that referred to their behaviour. A worry

about all of this is that – as with formal categories - it may create stereotypes that shape the way teachers treat particular students, and, in so doing, limit expectations of what they might achieve.

3. Rethinking categories: As the project developed, we noted the emergence of a perspective that goes beyond these first two ways of thinking.   The evidence suggests that this often arose as a result of listening to the views of the learners about their experiences in schools. This helped teachers to identify contextual barriers that may be making it difficult for some students to participate and learn, as well as possible ways of addressing these barriers, rather than only concentrating attention on groups of categorised students.   As we saw in the three examples, a problem with this perspective is that different students may offer varied or even contradictory views, thus making it difficult to know what actions will be most effective (in fact, this also applied when adopting the other two perspectives).   For example, it was common across the schools to hear students saying they preferred working in groups. But, of course, there were others for which that was not their choice. The implication is that whilst engaging with the views of students can stimulate teachers to think about differences in new ways, it does not take away the need for them to make professional decisions regarding the best ways to format their lessons.

The first two ways of thinking relate to what Paine (1990) refers to as *individual* and *categorical* orientations to difference, whereas the third way relates to what she calls a *contextual* orientation, where 'differences amongst individuals occur in patterns, yet these patterns are seen as connected to a social situation or embedded in a larger, dynamic context' (p. 3).   The third way of thinking also connect to the findings of our earlier work, particularly the argument that evidence collected by practitioners from their students can create space for reflection and a stimulus to experiment with new teaching approaches that have the potential to benefit all members of a class. For our teachers, what made them move into this way of thinking was, we noted, primarily a careful listening to the views of the students, as well as an exchange of ideas with other colleagues.

The extent to which teachers in the project moved to the third perspective, however, varied considerably from school to school, as well as between individuals within one school. Our analysis suggests that this was influenced by the quality of cooperation within the trios, particularly their willingness to listen to one another's different interpretations of the evidence. In other words, learning from differences requires a willingness to consider alternative points of views, amongst both students *and* teaching colleagues. And, in all cases, it was apparent that teachers had to learn about how to gather and engage with the views of students. This was, in part, a matter of the learning new techniques we shared with the teachers. However, it was also about the development of new attitudes, and the creation of more productive relationships - amongst teachers, and between teachers and students.

We also saw variations in respect to the way the approach was viewed within the project schools.   In some cases it continued to be seen largely as a temporary experiment, added on alongside the main practices of the school and trialled because

those involved were part of a project that would eventually disappear. In other cases, however, we saw how schools gradually moved the approach nearer to the centre of their normal ways of working. For example, one school had a well-established policy that emphasizes collaboration between members of staff. In this context, it is usual for two teachers to work together in one classroom. This provided many opportunities to explore the use of the strategy, within pairings rather than trios. In two of the schools, senior members of staff were involved in the trio activities. As a result, the approach gradually became part of the overall programme for staff development in these schools (Echeita, Simón, Sandoval & Monarca, 2013).

Using the strategy
At times, all of this proved to be challenging of the status quo within a school. Consequently, greater collaboration was needed amongst teachers in order to support the introduction of new practices. This required organizational flexibility and the active support of senior staff, prepared to encourage and support processes of experimentation.

In these senses, the evidence from the project supports research findings from elsewhere which suggest that classroom based research of this kind can be a powerful way of moving practice forward within a school (Gallimore et al, 2009; Talbert et al, 2010). What is distinctive in this particular project, however, is the added value that comes from engaging students themselves in the process. However, it is also clear that the use of the approach presents various organizational challenges that have to be addressed. In particular:

- *Finding time* – clearly time has to be found to enable staff to hold meetings and observe another's lessons. Given the potential impact of the strategy, this would seem like a sound investment. Put simply, by investing in teachers' learning there is likely to be a pay off in terms of students' learning.

- *Creating opportunities* – similarly, there is a need to make minor organizational changes in order to make it possible for these teacher development activities to occur. Links with other schools in the network added to the human resources available in this respect.

- *Facilitating trust* – the successful use of the approach demands the creation of partnerships within which colleagues and students feel able to gain mutual benefit. A helpful theoretical interpretation that can be made of what this involves is that of *social capital* (Mulford, 2007). In essence this involves the strengthening of collaboration in order to create pathways through which expertise and lessons from innovations can spread.

- *Encouraging experimentation* – the aim must be to try out new teaching approaches in order to find more effective ways of reaching students who are being marginalized during lessons.

The implication is, then, that senior staff within a school have to provide effective leadership by addressing these challenges in a way that helps to create a climate within which teacher professional development can take place, as recommended by Riehl (2000).

Conclusions

The research carried out by the partners in this study led us to refine further the propositions that inform our strategy for fostering the capacity of teachers to respond to student diversity. In summary, these refined propositions are as follows:

1. ***The views of students can help us to be more sensitive to issues of diversity and the ways that we organise learning in schools.*** However, teachers have to learn about how to gather and engage with such views, and be prepared to consider responses that challenge their established ways of thinking and acting.

2. ***Engaging with the views of others can stimulate professional discussion and experimentation amongst practitioners.*** In such contexts, differences can act as a further stimulus to new thinking. This, in turn, can encourage developments in practice that will make lessons more inclusive.

3. ***Collaboration is needed amongst teachers in order to support the introduction of new ways of working.*** This requires organisational flexibility and an emphasis on mutual support. The aim must be to foster teachers' communicative and interpersonal skills in order to develop their willingness to listen to students and to one another.

4. ***Learning from differences is likely to be challenging of the status quo within a school.*** Consequently, senior members of staff have to be prepared to encourage and support an inquiring stance and a willingness to experiment amongst their colleagues. They must also create a working climate within which the inevitable periods of turbulence that this will create can be tolerated.

Building on these four propositions, a set of professional materials has been developed (available free on the project website during 2014). These include a guide for teachers, an introductory video, and a series of accounts of practice illustrating the use of the strategy in schools in the three countries. We are hoping that through their use in new contexts these materials will be further refined. Given the experience of this project, we recommend that such use would be strengthened where schools work together within networks. In this way, it is possible to make available more resources that will encourage *learning from differences*.

Adina, Peter and Teresa, mentioned at the beginning of this paper, are only examples of the differences found amongst students in our schools. However, as we have shown, there are also significant differences amongst teachers, and the ways in which they perceive their students and what is happening in their classroom contexts. An engagement with such differences can lead teachers to reflect on their practices and the thinking behind their ways of working.

In this respect, our ideas are much influenced by the work of Michael Fielding (1999), who argues that teaching should become an inclusive professional practice, where practitioners engage not only with each other but also with others in mutual learning processes within a context of shared ideals. In this way, a school comes to be seen 'not only as a public space, but also as a public or collective workshop or laboratory… a place for public research and experimentation, and therefore a place that can bring about new thinking, new practice and change' (Fielding and Moss, 2011, p.109).

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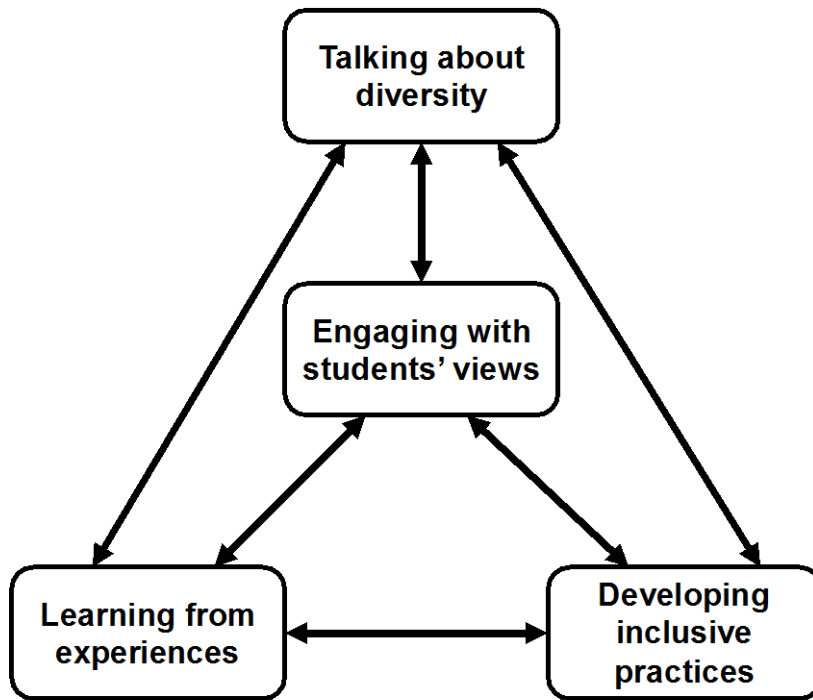
Figure 1. Learning From Differences: the strategy