Developing Inclusive Classroom Communities:
What Matters to Children in their Experiences of Inclusive Classroom Learning?

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This paper presents a recent study that examined how more inclusive classroom communities might be achieved. We were particularly interested in the contributions that children's perspectives could make to this work. The Framework of Participation, as a research tool, underpinned the research both conceptually and methodologically. We drew on an understanding of inclusive practice that recognises that individual differences between *all* learners are to be expected and welcomed, and acknowledges the complexity of everyday classroom experiences. We undertook fourteen group discussions, involving 56 children (aged 4-10), across seven primary schools in England. The discussions focused on two related areas: 'belonging' and 'being similar and being different', and how these might matter to the children's learning. Four key themes emerged: (i) feeling comfortable and being safe; (ii) learning as the main activity; (ii) being friends and getting on together; (iii) sharing behaviours and values. We discuss the relationship between these themes and how they can be used by teachers who seek to be more inclusive. We consider the value of listening carefully to children, not only for research purposes, but also as integral to the development of children's sense belonginess in their classroom communities.

Introduction

Research demonstrates that whilst many teachers articulate a strong commitment to the values of inclusion education, they often express anxiety about the daily practice of teaching increasingly diverse classes of children. Findings are consistent across many national settings, revealing tensions that are important to practitioners teacher educators and policy-makers, as well as children and their families (Cheung and Hui, 2007; Blecker and Boakes, 2010; Florian and Linklater 2010; EADSNE 2011; Forlin 2012; Black-Hawkins, 2017). Research has, understandably, concentrated on examining the views of teachers. However, more recently, there has been an increased focus on examining the contributions that children's perspectives can make (MacArthur 2013; Georgeson, Porter, Daniels and Feiler 2014; Vandenbussche and De Schauwer 2018; Ainscow and Messiou 2018; Shaw, Messiou and Voutsina 2019; Messiou 2019). Our study adds to this growing body of work by asking, 'What matters to children in their experiences of inclusive classroom learning?' We were particularly interested in children's views on two related areas - 'belonging' and 'being similar and being different' - and how these might matter to their learning.

A central component of research *about* children requires the inclusion *of* children, thereby recognising that they are able and knowledgeable members of their communities (Clark and Statham 2005). With regards to educational research, it has been clearly demonstrated that, by seeking children's views, adults can gain a fuller account of, and important insights into, classroom life (Mockler and Groundwater-Smith 2015). Cook-Sather (2006, 359) highlights three key premises that underpin such work. These are: children 'have unique perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling; that their insights warrant not only the attention but also the responses of adults; and that they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education'.

Meanwhile, research on the development of more inclusive classrooms has been sharply criticised for being too often one-dimensional: concentrating on single perspectives or actions - such as the children identified with a particular category of special needs and/or focused intervention strategies - rather than on the fundamental and complex interactions intrinsic to everyday classroom experiences (Artiles, Kozleski, Dorn and Christensen 2006). It is now over a decade since Artiles and his colleagues published this detailed review of classroom-based studies of inclusive education. They also drew attention to an over-emphasis on teaching and teachers, as the 'omniscient focus of all classroom activity', rather than on 'more complex views of learning and the roles that learners play in constructing learning over time' (p.94). Specifically, they argued for research to take greater account of students' views 'about how they best learned, how teachers could best help them, and what they needed to learn' (*ibid.*).

Further criticisms of research in inclusive education are highlighted by Göransson and Nilholm (2014). In an analysis of studies undertaken since 2006, they compare their findings to those of Artiles and his colleagues, highlighting a gradual, but substantial, increase in studies focusing on 'inclusion as creation of communities' (p.268). However, they argue that, whilst this might seem a positive development, much of this research is limited because it does not 'show[ing] how more

inclusive practices are to be achieved' (p.276). In particular, they note a 'lack of empirical evidence concerning how [such] communities are to be established'.

In our study, we addressed these on-going concerns in three ways. First, we sought the views of children, thus valuing the significant contribution that their individual and shared perspectives can make to understandings of inclusive classroom communities. Second, our research was underpinned by a conceptualisation of inclusive practice that recognises that individual differences between *all* learners are to be expected and welcomed whilst acknowledging the complexity of classroom experiences (Florian, Black-Hawkins and Rouse 2017). Finally, we set out to gather empirical evidence that would show how more inclusive classroom communities might be achieved.

Inclusive Classroom Communities: Participation, Belonging, Diversity and Learning

> A community exists when its members experience a sense of belonging or personal relatedness. In a community, the members feel that the group is important to them and that they are important to the group. Members of a community feel that the group will satisfy their needs; they will be cared for or supported. (Osterman 2000, 324)

Osterman's definition of community, in her review of *Students' Need for Belonging,* resonates strongly with our understanding of inclusive classroom communities. Our focus on exploring children's views on 'belonging' was based on the premise that, if children feel valued members of their class they are more likely to participate with and care about others, in ways that enable their own and everyone's learning (Nutbrown and Clough 2009; OECD 2017; Greenwood and Kelly 2019; Shaw et al 2019). Furthermore, since children do not simply become compliant and assimilated into an existing, unchanging classroom environment, we sought their views on 'being similar and being different', and how these matter to their learning. Responses to the diverse and changing membership of any class, and the quality of relationships formed therein, are integral to the development of inclusive classroom communities (Ainscow and Messiou 2018; Koster, Nakken Pijl and van Houten 2009; MacArthur 2013).

The Framework for Participation

The Framework for Participation underpinned our study, conceptually and methodologically. This research tool, developed with school and university colleagues, is designed to gather and analyse evidence of inclusive classroom practices (see Black-Hawkins 2014; Florian et al 2017). It is based on five interrelated principles of participation which, as discussed below, align closely with our research interests. For, as Vandenbussche and De Schauwer (2018, 10) demonstrate, at the heart of educational participation is a child's 'existential urge to belong'. The Framework also supported our research needs because its structure and flexibility allow a nuanced interpretation of children's perspectives. Both belonging and diversity, and their implications for learning, have cognitive, emotional, social and cultural dimensions, regarding what children understand, feel, offer and expect as members of their classes. The Framework enabled us to take account of these complexities of everyday classroom life as described by the children themselves.

Drawing on the Framework's Principles

1. Participation concerns all members and all aspects of classroom life: This principle supported our view of belonging as being about all children feeling accepted and valued in the community of the classroom (Osterman 2000; Greenwood and Kelly 2019; Shaw et al 2019) and having authentic opportunities to make progress in their learning (Florian et al 2017). Furthermore, we were keen to listen to the children's perspectives on all aspects of their classroom experiences that mattered to them: not only the formal teaching and learning in which they engaged, but also the wide range of everyday interactions and activities that might support or impede their sense of belonging (Kershner 2009; Black-Hawkins 2017).

2. Participation, and barriers to participation, are inter-connected and continual processes: Educational belonging (like educational participation) is best understood not as a state of being but as processes of becoming (Vandenbussche and De Schauwer 2018). It is complex and multi-faceted, experienced differently by different children and shifts over time. Schools as organisations, and teachers within them, must actively engage in finding creative ways to develop and maintain children's sense of belonging. Similarly, schools and teachers need to be vigilant in identifying and reducing barriers to belonging. (Greenwood and Kelly 2019; Gillies 2017; MacArthur 2013). All these studies highlight the urgency of this work, as well as the value of paying attention to children's views. Educational belongingness cannot be left to chance (OECD 2017).

3. Participation is concerned with responses to diversity: Because every child is a unique individual with different experiences, characteristics and preferences, the membership of any class will always be diverse (Florian *et al* 2017). Supporting children's belonging does not require uniformity, assimilation or a denial of differences. However, classroom responses to diversity (Ainscow and Messiou 2018) may strengthen and/or diminish those feelings and some groups of learners are more vulnerable to marginalisation than others; for example, disabled children (MacArthur 2013), disadvantaged students (OECD 2017), children identified with special educational needs (Koster et al 2009) and first generation immigration students (OECD 2017). Whilst we did not choose to ask the children about any specific groups of learners, we were keen to understand their perspectives on 'being similar and being different' (Nutbrown and Clough 2009).

4. Participation requires learning to be active and collaborative: Learning and teaching are social and collective activities (Kershner, 2009) at the heart of a classroom community. Children's belonging is strengthened by involvement in their own learning as well as their peers (Greenwood and Kelly 2019; Osterman 2000). 'Democratic pedagogies' enable children to have meaningful choices about how they learn, including taking account of 'children's interests' as well as greater 'autonomy over the content, context or mode of delivery of the pedagogical activity' (Shaw et al 2019, 11). Children also need to learn how to work collaboratively, thereby becoming 'responsible contributors belonging in the community' (Rogoff 2007, 412), and developing an 'appreciation of others and experiencing themselves as part of a supportive community' (Osterman 2000, 350).

5. Participation is based on relationships of mutual recognition and acceptance: The quality and character of children's classroom relationships with both peers and adults are central to their belongingness (Osterman 2000; Koster et al 2009; OECD 2017; Shaw et al, 2019, Greenwood and Kelly 2019). This final principle is premised on reciprocity and mutuality; that is all children have the right to be themselves whilst accepting the responsibility for valuing others (Macmurray 1950). As noted above, this includes the right and responsibility to learn alongside others as well as to participate in decisions about how learning takes place. 'If interactions are positive and affirming, students will have a stronger sense of relatedness […] On the contrary, if experiences are negative, if students receive information that they are not valued and that their behavior is unwelcome, their sense of relatedness suffers' (Osterman 2000 ???).

The Study[1]

The fieldwork took place during a single academic year, involving one class from seven primary schools, across four local authorities. Whilst the schools were all state maintained and co-educational, they were diverse in terms of pupil numbers and backgrounds, ranging from a smaller than average school with about 140 children serving a relatively affluent semi-rural community, to an urban school with nearly 500 children, with approximately 40% eligible for free school meals. The seven teachers who volunteered to join the study, were already known to the research team, having undertaken their initial teacher education, and then their master's degrees at our university during the previous three or four years. Our primary method of data collection was through group discussions. We used a random sampling strategy to select eight children from each class, to form two groups of four children (a total of fourteen groups and fifty-six children). The children were aged from 4 to 11 years.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were at the forefront of our preparations: acknowledging both the sensitivity needed when working directly with children as well as how to disseminate our findings with their teachers and other colleagues. The schools acted as formal gatekeepers to the children's involvement, but parents were also notified of the nature of our visits and asked for their consent. Furthermore, we considered it important to gain the children's consent as far as possible and to be respectful of their sense of agency in the discussion (Kanyal and Cooper 2012). We began each discussion by describing the purpose of our visit, what we hoped to learn, and how we might share their ideas with other people. We explained that they did not need to join in, if they did not want to. All the children gave their verbal agreement to participate, except one who chose to stay but not to speak in the discussion. She indicated her views through gesture to signal her agreement or otherwise with her peers. Another child declined to be videoed and sat out of view of the camera, but still participated fully in the discussion.

Group discussions

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[1] The study was set within a larger project: BUILD (Belonging, Understanding, Inclusion, Learning, Diversity). This schools-university network focused on early career teachers' development of inclusive pedagogy.

We chose group discussions to encourage the children to draw on their educational experiences, through personal and shared stories (Freeman and Mathison 2009). This strengthened our research intention of collecting empirical evidence about how more inclusive practices might be achieved, but in ways that acknowledged the complexity of daily classroom life. Furthermore, as a familiar classroom activity, peer group discussion helped to put the children at ease. Significantly, it also provided opportunities for each child to reflect on, and thereby clarify and extend, their ideas. There is a dynamic aspect to dialogic and collaborative thinking, so that shared knowledge enables further understandings to be co-constructed and developed (Mercer 2004), supporting the children to make sense of their worlds.

The following questions guided the discussions:
1. Belonging:
   - What does it mean to belong to your class?
   - Does belonging matter to your learning?
2. Diversity:
   - How are children similar to each other in your class and how are they different?
   - Does being similar or different matter to your learning?

These were devised to enable the children to think widely about their experiences of belonging, as well as being different, and being similar, in the context of their classroom. However, they acted only as starting points. We were concerned about 'finding the right language […] so that it is relevant and understood as intended by all children' (Porter 2014, 411). As Freeman and Mathison (2009, 95) note, when researching with children it is important to 'rethink[ing] abstract terms in relationship to children's daily experiences'. Therefore, our role as facilitators required us to explain our key terms in a range of ways, partly depending on the ages of the children. The discussions lasted between 30-60 minutes and took place in spaces which were familiar to the children, such as their classrooms or school library. Our intention was to enhance the children's sense of comfort when faced with the unfamiliar experience of discussing their views with members of the research team (Cooper, 2014). In ten of the fourteen groups, their class teacher stayed in sight of the children, but outside the discussion. All groups were recorded using video cameras, to capture both verbal and non-verbal exchanges.

Analysis

We transcribed our recordings using an 'intelligent verbatim' approach: conserving the children's words, but without including filler words, extended repetitions or similar. Data were then coded using the organisational structure of the Framework for Participation (see headings below). Two of the research team did this independently before bringing their separate analyses together to establish final themes. Of course, the children's experiences and ideas did not necessarily fit neatly into the Framework's structure. Therefore, we made judgements about where best to place our data, based on offering as comprehensive an understanding of the children's perceptions as possible. This section provides brief extracts from the transcriptions, not only to value the children's distinctive contributions as research participants but also to indicate how coding decisions were made through

interpretations of the children's talk. Finally, we note the children's ages in recognition that children who are, say, four years old may express their educational experiences differently from those who are, say, ten.

1. Participation and access: being there
Section One of the Framework supported our analysis of the children's perceptions of belonging in terms of joining and being present in their classroom, and being welcomed in its spaces, places and activities. Much discussion concerned feelings of being comfortable, safe and at ease. As one boy (8-9 years) explained: *'Belonging means, like you're meant to be there'*. Similar ideas were expressed in this exchange (4-5 years):

> *'You have to be safe.'*
> *'You have to be together.'*
> *'So you don't lose anybody.'*

These core emotions were also illustrated by this child (8-9 years):

> *'If you're not comfortable with everything that you're doing, or the teacher's doing something that you're not used to, or maybe some people aren't being nice to you because you're new, you couldn't learn as well.'*

Here she acknowledged how feeling comfortable enhanced her capacity to learn. This supports Bath's (2009) study of young children in their first year of formal schooling in which she identified a close association between children's sense of belonging to their class and the quality of their subsequent learning.

Belonging was also strongly expressed in terms of classroom friendships and other relationships. One girl (10-11 years) explained: *'I've been here my whole life really and it's just like you know everybody'*. Similar views about the importance of familiarity were also evident even amongst the youngest children (4-5 years):

> *'And you see them* [friends] *everyday so you know them really well.'*
> *'And you get to play.'*
> *'Yes, because then we get friends and stuff and we get to play.'*

As Osterman argues, educational belonging can be understood in terms of a sense of sharing, acceptance and a willingness to contribute. One boy (10-11 years) described this as: *'It's where you've chosen to be, and your classmates and friends, and that's where you belong'*. Furthermore, when peer relationships go wrong, feelings of being comfortable can dissipate and affect learning: *'If someone's being mean to you and you think that you don't belong there, you can be thinking about it in class and not listening to the teacher, so you're not learning anything'* (10-11 years).

Many of the children also articulated their experiences of belonging in terms of attachment to their particular class. Affiliation and loyalty were often expressed as being 'special', or their class and/or teacher as the 'best' in the school. Being part of something important and worthwhile, seemed to strengthen the children's sense of belonging and their desire to be included. One child (6-7 years) explained: *'It's quite special to belong to something, because if you didn't belong to anything you would feel quite left out'*. Later, another child in the group reiterated these ideas of specialness and

loyalty when reflecting on his teacher's feelings: '*I think she thinks about belonging to the class because she's quite a special person to the class, isn't she, because she's our teacher'*. A child (8-9 years) in another school commented: '*She belongs with us because she's our teacher*'.

2. Participation and collaboration: learning and working together

Section Two of the Framework also considered children's classroom relationships but with a specific focus on learning and working together. As Kershner, Warwick, Mercer and Kleine Staarman (2012) indicate, friendship groups are key to children's learning through positive peer engagement. More generally, working collaboratively provides important opportunities to develop common knowledge and create a sense of shared understanding (Mercer 2004). In the words of one child (8-9 years): '*I think that belonging does matter to your learning, because if you're stuck on your work you've got someone to help'.* Similar ideas were offered in nearly all discussions, although it was notable that examples of peer collaborations were overwhelmingly informal and spontaneous, taking place 'in the moment', rather than activities specifically planned by teachers that required collaboration for successful completion. This child's (10-11 years) comment is typical: '*Because everyone around you helps and if you don't understand a question, a friend on your table will help you answer it or re-read the question to you'.*

Some children distinguished between collaborations that merely provided answers and those which enhanced peers' learning. One group (8-9 years) was exploring how children in their class differ from each other in terms of curriculum subjects: '*Some of us are good at maths and some of us need a bit more help.'* They then considered how best to support peers in their learning:

> '*If they don't know, what 12 times 12 is, then you can't just say 144 because it's not going to make them learn anything.'*
> '*Well they do learn that 12 times 12 is 144, but they don't learn anything else.'*

As Mercer (2004) indicates, such ways of working benefit not only the learning of the child who is being supported by a peer, but also strengthens the understanding of the child who is offering the support. The discussion also mirrors Rogoff's (2007) research, which highlights not only the right of learners to be supported but also their responsibility to offer appropriate and worthwhile support to others. Encouraging all children to make informal use of the collective resource that greater learner diversity brings to their classroom community has been identified as an important facet of inclusive practice (Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011).

Finally, children discussed the role of teachers (and other adults) as a resource when they got 'stuck' in their learning, which in turn enhanced their sense of comfort. Asking for help was invariably described as a positive experience: '*We help each other when we need it and if I'm stuck on a certain word, if a child doesn't know we can ask the teacher and they're supportive as well'* (10-11 years). Later in the same discussion another child noted: '*I think* [teacher] *don't mind us being different because if we're different we don't know the same things so our teachers can learn from us'.* Here the second child also recognised that learning is a reciprocal process in which teachers can learn from children, if children are allowed the space to express their opinions.

3. Participation and achievement: supporting everyone's learning

Our focus here related to two aspects of the children's understandings of what learning might mean for everyone in the classroom community. These were: first, how far the children regarded progress in learning as an everyday expectation for themselves and their peers (Hart and Drummond 2014; Kershner 2009) and second, the extent to which they recognised and valued a range of differing achievements (Florian et al 2017). Our analysis shows that in every group there was a strong acknowledgement that learning (however construed) was the core activity of classroom life, and engaging in this shared enterprise seemed to reinforce the children's sense of belonging. These views were clearly established even amongst the youngest children (4-5 years). For example, 'learning' was key when comparing their experiences of school to that of pre-school:

> *'Cause in pre-school all you do is play and tidy up.'*
> Q: *'So what's the difference here?'*
> *'Cause you don't just play here, you.'*
> *'You learn.'*

As noted, we were particularly interested in how far the children recognised that individual peers differed in their learning in terms of achievements, knowledge, skills and experiences. Evidence can be seen in extracts already given (e.g. *'If you're stuck on your work you've got someone to help'* and *'Some of us are good at maths and some of us need a bit more help'*). Nevertheless, when asked, 'How are children similar to each other in your class, and how are they different?' the children made little reference to achievements, discussing diversity primarily in terms of physical features, feelings and/or behaviours (see section 4). However, when views were given they invariably focused on being helpful; for example (10-11 years):

> *'Some people don't like speaking aloud and some people are really confident and if they don't want to do something you could say, "Oh I'll do it for you" and being helpful is, helps other people to like, grow in confidence.'*

4. Participation and diversity: recognising and accepting difference

This final section of the Framework supported our analysis of the children's perspectives on classroom diversity: specifically, the kinds of differences and similarities they might identify amongst their peers, and whether being similar or different mattered to their learning. Further insights into their views of 'belonging' also emerged, notably in terms of developing respectful relationships with each other, as well as the importance of conforming to expected classroom behaviours.

Maybe unsurprisingly, discussions about 'being different' included references to how children differed in terms of physical appearance. Indeed, for the youngest children (4-5 years) this was their main focus, for example:

> *'They talk differently and they have different skin...'*
> *'Some children are bigger.'*
> *'Some children are smaller.'*

Here, as in all groups, the children merely presented these differences as part of ordinary classroom life. Meanwhile, whilst the older children also made reference to physical attributes, they also offered broader notions of 'being different' and 'being similar': *We're all on different stages in our learning and that's all different. Our looks are all different and our body parts are different, but our feelings are all the same'* (9-10 years).

When asked about 'being similar', the youngest children paid particular attention to how they shared, or were expected to share, classroom behaviours and attitudes. For example, (4-5 years):
> *'To be good and to be kind.'*
> *'You have to be good.'*
> *'You don't need to be bad or people will tell you off.'*
> *'Don't be naughty.'*

This concern with conforming to expected classroom behaviours was reiterated by the older children, although perhaps in more sophisticated ways. Notably, the image of 'family' membership was used to convey both differences as well as similarities: *'While you're at school they're like your family and you have to respect them and treat them like your friends and family'* (10-11 years).

The idea of 'families' and 'respect' also conveyed the children's sense of mutual responsibility required of members of the classroom community, and regardless of perceived similarities and differences. One girl (7-8 years) suggested: *'If a new girl comes […] you have to respect her and show her how to behave'*. And, in another group,: *'If you don't feel like you're respected as well then you don't feel that you belong there'* (10-11 years). The importance of contributing to something bigger than oneself was vividly portrayed, by one boy (9-10 years): *'Like you're a part of it, if you weren't there it would be like a puzzle and a piece of the puzzle wasn't there'*. This simile for belonging, as a piece of the puzzle that both fits and is noticeably missing if absent, suggests an awareness of, and empathy with, belonging to the classroom community (Osterman 2000).

It is worth noting that no children remarked on a child 'being different' based on an identified special educational need or disability, even though all were in classes in which either themselves and/or some peers had been formally identified as such. There were also very few references to social, cultural or ethnic differences and even then they were minimal; for example, one group spoke about a girl who had recently joined their class, explaining that she did not speak English, which was unusual in that particular context.

Findings

From our data analysis we identified four broad themes with regard to what matters to children in their experiences of inclusive classroom learning. These findings were consistent across all fourteen group discussions, and regardless of the children's ages or school settings.

(i)   *Feeling comfortable and being safe:* First, and perhaps most significantly, the study suggests that feeling comfortable and being safe were fundamental to the children's experiences of

belonging to their classroom communities, and as such were highly valued by them. This is also closely linked to the feelings expressed in (iv) below.

(ii)   *Learning as the main activity:* Second, all groups referred to learning as the main activity, or purpose, for being in their classes, and engaging in this collective enterprise seemed to strengthen their feelings of membership. Some (older) children brought together themes (i) and (ii) in their articulation of how being at ease supported their capacity to learn.

(iii)   *Having friends and working together:* Third, different kinds of classroom relationships contributed to the children's experiences of inclusive classroom learning. For many, positive peer friendships were a crucial aspect of feeling comfortable, and some described their feelings of discomfort, when friendships did not go well and the detrimental effect this had on their learning. Whilst, some children particularly liked to work with their friends, many also valued the communal and varied resource brought by peers more generally, to support their own and others' learning. The role of teachers, and the children's relationships with them, reflected many of the same concerns. In particular, the children emphasised liking and being liked by their teachers, and wanting to help and be helped by them.

(iv)   *Sharing behaviours and values:* All groups emphasised how sharing behaviours and values contributed to their sense of community: from the youngest children's views on 'being good' and 'not being naughty' to the older children's articulation of the importance of sharing, being kind, and being willing to contribute. These understandings were also expressed in terms of loyalty, attachment and pride in being members of their particular classroom communities: expressed as being 'special' and often in comparison to other classes.

In addition, our study suggests that children's perspectives on learner diversity (being similar' and 'being different') forms an important and familiar context for the development of these four themes. Whilst all groups talked briefly about peers' physical characteristics (such as colour of eyes, hair, or skin), such distinctions were presented as part of everyday classroom life. Amongst the youngest children 'being similar' was explored in terms of meeting teachers' expectations about classroom behaviours. These ideas were also considered by the older children, many of whom, however, articulated them in terms of a shared responsibility (i.e. not only the teacher's) for developing behaviours and attitudes through classroom relationships based on reciprocal respect. Key examples of this were given in their descriptions of supporting others' learning and being supported in their own. In so doing, the children recognised that some peers found some aspects of learning more or less straightforward than others. Many children also discussed their own and their friends' experiences of being sad, or angry, as a way of being different. Again, mutually supportive classroom relationships were crucial in responding to these emotions through the giving and receiving of help and support from adults and peers: whether being kind to someone who was sad or giving help when someone was 'stuck' with their work.

Figure 1 provides a summary of the ideas above. In the form of a tetrahedron it represents how the four identified themes connect to and are support by each other. That is, whilst the children's discussions demonstrated that securing classroom communities as places where *feeling comfortable and being safe* is essential, they also illustrated how this can be enhanced by the development of mutually supportive relationships (*having friends and working together*), which in turn encourages children's individual and collective learning (*learning as the main activity*). Meanwhile, engaging in collective learning promotes the *sharing of behaviours and values* and, doing so, not only nurtures mutually supportive relationships but also reinforces the children's sense of *feeling comfortable and being safety*. [Insert Figure 1]

Discussion

Methodological considerations

Like all research, there were limitations to our methodology. Whilst the children were randomly selected from each class, the teachers knew us and had volunteered to participate. However, this fitted our study as we were keen to learn from children whose teachers were interested in developing inclusive classroom communities. We also acknowledge the potential weaknesses of collecting data through group discussions. Notably, our time with the children was limited, and had they got to know us better, our findings might well have been enriched (Porter 2019). However, members of the research team visited each class, allowing the children to become more familiar with us, whilst providing useful context to the discussions. Finally, we took steps to provide opportunities for all the children to speak. As facilitators we encouraged them to talk to one another rather than to us and, since the groups were small, it was also possible to monitor and encourage contributions from all. Certainly, our observations and recordings indicate that the children seemed engaged and interested in discussing their perspectives on belonging and diversity.

Implications for research and practice

Our study demonstrates that, through supported group discussions, children are able to make a worthwhile contribution to research on inclusive classroom communities. Indeed, some children articulated their views in ways that vividly portrayed a complex understanding of their daily classroom lives. We have endeavoured to illustrate this richness in the presentation and discussion of our findings. Underpinning our study was the broader aim of gathering empirical evidence that would be useful to teachers who seek to develop more inclusive classroom communities. We suggest that the four themes emerging from our study, and their relationship to each other (Figure 1), provide a helpful structure for doing so. Indeed, we have successfully used materials based on these themes with cohorts of student teachers as they plan the practical steps they want to take as they prepare to teach new classes. We ask them to reflect on how every classroom community is different and the implications of this for developing more inclusive learning. In so doing, we encourage them to consider engaging children in dialogue to explore what matters to them regarding: *feeling comfortable and being safe, learning as the main activity, being friends and getting on together,* and *the sharing of behaviours and values.*

However, as Veck (2009, 141) reminds us, if we are serious about 'listening to include' then how, and why, teachers engage in dialogue with children is crucial. Children must believe that their views will be heard attentively and taken seriously (MacArthur 2013). Nutbrown and Clough (2009, 4) describe this as 'voice with action', arguing only then can children experience 'genuine participation, inclusion and belonging' as members of their classroom communities. This more radical approach to dialogue involves a 'cultural change which, in itself, is a manifestation of a commitment to inclusion as a principled approach to education' (Messiou 2019, 768). Through our study we have demonstrated the importance of listening to children's views to develop more inclusive classroom communities. However, it also seems clear that listening carefully to children is an essential aspect of strengthening their sense of inclusion and belongingness.

In his essay, 'Belonging in an age of exclusion', Slee (2019) notes that, at national and global levels, notions of 'community, diversity and inclusion animate official educational policy discourse'. However, he goes on to describe this as a 'collective fiction' (pp.909-10), masking many forms of exclusion for millions of vulnerable children and young people. He also reminds us that 'exclusion and estrangement though played out in big numbers are also intensively individual and personal experiences' (p.911). On the one hand, the immense scale of this injustice seems impossible to resolve. On the other hand, by focusing on the individual and the personal, perhaps, there is some hope. That is, it is still important to develop evidence-based support for teachers who seek to be more inclusive in their classroom practices. Doing so has the potential to improve the educational experiences of each child in their care. It does not, of course, address the current scale of educational exclusion. Nevertheless, there is value in 'going on small adventures' that aim to 'shift[ing] towards a community of hope, disseminating practices of imagination' (Vandenbussche and de Schauwer 2018, 10). The aim of our study has been to contribute to this work.

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Figure 1: What matters to children in their experiences of inclusive classroom learning?

feeling comfortable and
being safe

learning as the main
activity

sharing behaviours and
values

having friends and
working together