Editorial

Respecting the Voices of Individuals from Marginalised Communities in Research—"Who Is Listening and Who Isn't?"

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Internationally, Governments have signed up to the principles of ensuring that they support the development of greater equity and inclusion in education. However, despite some progress many individuals and communities continue to face discrimination and remain on the margins of society. This collection of papers draws attention to the many challenges faced by persons who are perceived to be different from the majority population in their communities. This labelling of individuals has served to exclude many from engaging fully with those social and educational opportunities that the majority take for granted.

A focus upon those characteristics associated with disability, gender or culture that emphasises difference in the eyes of those in authority without understanding the lived experiences of individuals has been a major inhibiting factor in the movement towards inclusion. The authors who have contributed to this Special Edition have all challenged the stereotypical views of such individuals. They have done so by ensuring that the voices of those who best understand the experience of living with discrimination can be heard.

The examples provided within these papers demonstrate how a range of influences from policy makers and teachers to the wider public have determined the opportunities available to individuals. While discriminatory attitudes and practices persist, these papers demonstrate examples of resistance and resilience in the face of continued oppression. In this Special Edition, authors from several countries have highlighted how, by listening to and respecting the voices of marginalised individuals, we can support them in taking greater control of their lives and challenge those who seek to exclude them.

Discrimination can take many forms. This edition, for example, shows how the cultural limitations placed upon women in a community in India and the traveller community in Ireland has resulted in low expectations for academic and social achievements. Similarly, negative attitudes towards members of the transgender community or students with intellectual disabilities leads to increased marginalisation and limited life opportunities.

A commitment to democratic principles requires that the voices of all individuals should be listened to and respected. A failure to do so will invariably lead to greater dissatisfaction, alienation and a perpetuation of the very marginalisation that we are seeking to address. At times this process may be uncomfortable, particularly for those within authority who are unprepared to change and who may feel threatened by such actions.

These papers demonstrate how listening to the voices of marginalised individuals can become an important first step towards a process of change. Such an action fundamentally challenges established procedures, where opportunities to learn from the experiences of marginalised individuals have been neglected. We acknowledge that listening is only the starting point for a radical re-engagement that enables marginalised individuals to participate fully in society. However, several of the authors who have contributed their research to this Special Edition have provided an indication of how the movement towards equity and inclusion may be advanced.

The international policy imperative to listen to the voices of children and young people is eloquently expressed by Mangiaracina and her colleagues. Stressing the need to move beyond policy to ensure that the voices of previously marginalised populations are not only heard but achieve a level of authority and influence, they provide examples from the work of a European agency committed to the promotion of inclusion. In stating that "learners could and should be able to bring new perspectives and determine more adapted solutions to current educational realities," these authors go directly to the crux of the argument for greater student involvement that has been a driving force beyond this collection of papers.

While there is often positive intent in government policies there is also evidence that there is a considerable divergence in how this is experienced by children and their families within marginalised communities. Malmqvist, for example, examines the operation of pupil referral units (PRUs) in Sweden, ostensibly designed to enable young people experiencing difficulties in learning to catch up with their peers. However, the PRUs tended to be characterised by low academic outcomes and persistent behaviour difficulties, the very outcomes PRUs were intended to address. The pupils were disappointed by these experiences and felt disempowered as a result. Increased educational provision for young people from the Travelling community and recent migrants was a policy initiative within the Irish context. However, a school catering for these two groups of young people was characterised by low expectations and poor academic outcomes, an example that the authors McGinley and Keane argue of an increasingly segregated system of provision for Travelers and recent migrants. Within the Austrian context, the intersectionality between disability and forced migration has been overlooked in government policies that essentially treat disability and forced migration as separate entities with no visible connections. Singh and colleagues report that forced migrants who have a disability experience severe difficulties in accessing appropriate services. The authors recommend that accessible information is vital for parents and that increased collaboration between government departments is required to provide customised services for forced migrants who have a disability. Banks and Smyth examine how school level factors can play a central role in student disengagement and early school leaving. They focused on two government initiatives designed to address these issues. It was observed that these initiatives were characterised by caring and respectful teacher–student relationships that were central to addressing student disengagement and early school leaving. However, despite the evident success of these initiatives, the authors make the pertinent observation that both initiatives operate outside the mainstream education system and as a result have little impact or influence in addressing student disengagement and early school leaving within the broader context of mainstream schools.

Women in the Devanga community in India are subject to gender discrimination and a dominant male patriarchy, as reported by Haridarshan. The voices of women from this traditional weaving community have rarely been heard and are routinely suppressed. The oppression experienced by women in this community is a product of a variety of factors including the predominance of orthodox beliefs and practices that reinforce male dominance combined with the traditions of early marriage and domestic responsibilities. Evidence suggests that incidents of domestic violence have increased significantly through the period of the COVID-19 pandemic [1,2] and this has inevitably impacted the mental health of both adults and children. Norah Sweetman, in a paper that draws upon research from Ireland, demonstrates how listening to the voices of both parents and young people not only elicits pertinent research evidence but may also prove cathartic. This can only be achieved when both the instruments for field work and the quality of intervention are assured, a fact that is further recognised in the work of John Kubiak and his colleagues. In their study, a critical appraisal of the experiences of young adults with learning disabilities provides important insights into the effectiveness of provisions being made within a higher education establishment. These researchers describe the transformative effect of encouraging young people to voice their experiences while enabling them to develop new competencies and confidence in planning their own futures. A fine example is given of the

ways in which power is transferred from the traditional voice of authority to that of the individual who has a lived experience of disability.

Parents and families play a critical role in supporting children who have disabilities and/or experience difficulties in learning. Twomey draws on the metaphor of parent as nomad in the search for appropriate services for their child. Parents often experience isolation as this journey continues over an extended period and their identity shifts as this quest continues to ensure that their child is included in society. Preece and colleagues examine the experiences of families who have children with autism in coastal communities in England. They highlight the intersectionality between the autism-specific needs of children and the lack of specialised services available in coastal regions. This situation is further complicated by a coastal region characterised by poor infrastructure, lack of trained professionals and limited autism awareness. In Pakistan, Hammad reports on the educational experiences of children who have a hearing impairment. Strong family support for the child can result in limited opportunities to access meaningful employment outside the family. As Hammad comments, the child is a product of the family rather than society. Where the opposite occurs and there is weak family support the child is almost totally dependent on society and limited resources result in few opportunities to attain meaningful employment. Hammad highlights the importance of technology as an enabler to empower children with a hearing impairment and lessen dependence on the family.

As we write this chapter, the war in Ukraine, following the invasion of a sovereign state by Russian troops, has led to the forced migration of many families from that devastated country. McGillicuddy and her colleagues, well versed in their appreciation of the challenges created by forced migration, provide significant advice to those who work with such populations. The voices presented in their work are urgent and powerful and provide a clear justification for conducting research that is both respectful and empathetic to those who experience marginalisation within our societies. As in all of the papers presented in this collection, the need to challenge traditional power relationships that have resulted in actions being undertaken on behalf of excluded individuals and communities, often with an inadequate understanding of their lived experiences, is evident.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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