Close-to-practice research: The need for student voice and the strange case of Academy *x*

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Close-to-practice research: The need for student voice and the strange case of Academy *x*

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Abstract

The idea that teaching and school leadership should be informed by research and other evidence has developed traction recently in England and other jurisdictions. Yet, such research has too seldomly involved the student perspective in leadership decision-making. This article presents a case study of an 'all through' academy in the south of England (Academy *x*) that attempted to address this issue through research that was close to practice in nature. Here, school leaders, teachers, parents and, specifically, disadvantaged male students' perspectives of barriers and enablers to their attainment were explored with a view to working collaboratively with these stakeholders to respond to the findings. However, we had not taken into account that the credibility of the students' perspectives and the nature of the messages emerging from the findings would be questioned, and would influence a decision by school leaders not to act upon them. We consider how these issues might be addressed if student voice as a form of close-to-practice research is to become a reality.

Keywords: student voice, close-to-practice research, disadvantage, attainment

Introduction: Close-to-practice research

Currently in England, as well as in many other jurisdictions worldwide, the idea that teaching and school leadership should be informed by research and other evidence has developed traction (Whitty and Wisby, 2017). Indeed the British Educational Research Association (BERA) recently announced that it was undertaking its own research into what it called 'close-to-practice research'. On its website, BERA (2017: n.p.) noted that:

> Close-to-practice research refers to educational research that is based on problems in practice, often involves researchers working in partnership with practitioners, may address issues defined by the latter as relevant or useful, and will support the application of critical thinking, and the use of evidence in practice.

BERA's interest in close-to-practice research is informed by a theory of action that suggests that if teachers and school leaders are able to access and engage with high-quality research evidence, and if this evidence helps them identify areas for development and improvement, then this should lead to teachers and schools using such evidence to develop new and effective approaches to teaching and learning. This should enhance outcomes for children and young people. BERA's thinking follows a path that is now increasingly well trodden and that has led to a number of initiatives

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underway to support educators in engaging with and utilizing research findings. For example, see the growth in interest in research learning communities (Brown, 2017). It is also a path that is being viewed as increasingly fruitful to follow, with evidence suggesting that educators' use of research can indeed improve both teaching practice and student outcomes (for example, see Mincu, 2014; Rose *et al.*, 2017). Yet, as Mansfield *et al.* (2012: 21) pointed out: 'While much research has explored leading schools for social justice, it has rarely considered the student perspective as an integral component of leadership decision-making.' This article presents a small study that attempted to redress this issue by exploring a range of stakeholders', and specifically students', perspectives on barriers and enablers to attainment in an 'all through' academy – Academy *x* – with a view to working collaboratively with each stakeholder to respond to the findings ('all through' academy means students attend primary to secondary school located on the same site). However, we had not taken into account a number of factors that have been shown to influence whether educators will take on board and respond to research findings. These include the credibility of the source of the research and the nature of the messages emerging from the findings (Brown, 2013; Nutley *et al.*, 2007). Consequently, we consider how researchers might approach similar projects differently in the future, such that meaningful learning communities might be established to support and enable new ways of working.

Background: The problem of voice and what counts as credible evidence

The current move towards developing evidence-based practice coincides with increasing calls for student voice to become more prominent in policy debates and research concerning children and young people's lives (Livingstone and Third, 2017; DfE, 2018). These calls respond to concerns that, although the notion of student voice has become commonplace in mainstream schools across England (Sellman, 2009) and is now an institutionalized concept (Connor, 2015; Cook-Sather, 2013), 'voice' has largely been interpreted as meaning having a say as participants in the institutions they attend, but limits further participation in the processes of change.

The renewed interest in action research studies attempts to address this issue by creating communicative spaces (Habermas, 1996) in which the 'co-participants join one another in the struggle to remake the practices in which they interact' (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2007: 277) and, as such, enact Aristotle's practical reasoning (phronesis). However, exploration and participatory action in schools, and particularly that which involves students, have until recently been largely limited to classroom-based relationships and activities. At the same time, the growth in participatory models of action research has now started to extend beyond the classroom to inform school leadership and teaching (Whitty and Wisby, 2017). Here partnerships between researchers and practitioners address wider problems by supporting the application of critical thinking and the use of evidence in their practice. Yet, although enabling a form of student voice and participatory action with practitioners and researchers, these forms of action research are still limited to a tradition that 'is a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986: 162).

Hence, despite the exploration of young people's practices in order to inform the subsequent development of classroom, curricular and wider school interventions, much evidence-informed research and outcomes have remained adult- rather than

young person-led and controlled (Oliver and Dalrymple, 2008). These research studies and interventions do not therefore guarantee any degree of control of the conduct or outcomes of the research process by young people involved (Fleming and Boeck, 2012; Connor, 2015). This limiting process can also leave student voice vulnerable to questions of credibility, as it becomes positioned outside teachers' and school leaders' frames of reference employed in their everyday professional judgements (Elliott, 2007: 155). As such, it is questionable whether they fully address the range of issues identified through the research processes that young people face in the classroom or wider school site.

It is with these limitations in mind that the findings and recommendations emerging from a study carried out at Academy *x* are presented and discussed in this article. The study, commissioned by the secondary school head teacher at Academy *x*, would enable school leaders to respond to an inspection report by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). The report pointed out that, although disadvantaged students entitled to the support of pupil premium funding (additional funding provided by government for publicly funded schools in England to help close attainment gaps between disadvantaged students and their peers) generally achieved highly across the school, there was still disparity between boys' and girls' attainment. Recommendations were made that leaders and those responsible for governance at Academy *x* should ensure that across the whole school (Key Stages (KS) 1–4/ages 4–16), the performance of boys rose still further to match that of girls.

In line with their interest in the co-author's work establishing research learning communities (Brown, 2017) and the lead author's work on participatory action research (Edwards, 2018), the secondary school head teacher intended that the research findings be presented at a staff training day in September 2018, at which recommendations would be made that would enable the stakeholders to work alongside these lower attaining (specifically disadvantaged) boys and their families to facilitate meaningful change to this end. In this sense, the research was participatory and close to practice in nature, but participation in subsequent actions was limited (at the request of the secondary school head teacher) to the reflective stage of the action research cycle (see Carr and Kemmis, 1986).

However, attention is drawn to the response of the academy secondary school head teacher, who then challenged the credibility of the data in the final report and expressed concerns about taking on board the voice of the students at the focus of the study, thus terminating the dissemination of the findings prior to reflection at the training days. The responses that the authors received from the head teacher are discussed and analysed, and the causes of the concerns identified. Further consideration is given to issues faced by researchers when gatekeepers limit the dissemination of findings that may not make for comfortable reading, and to rethinking the choice of methodology, which might have sought the participation of school leaders at the start, rather than at the end of the process.

Methodology

The rationale for disseminating the findings at a continuing professional development (CPD) training day and developing collaborative actions was that, although initially deductive and led by questions posed and driven by the Ofsted report recommendations, a level of participatory action that involved students and parents in the final stages of the process was welcomed by the leadership team. Allowing

students' voice, at least in part, to extend beyond 'having a say' to becoming involved in making meaningful changes to the institution they attended meant voice was therefore facilitated as speech *and* action (Arendt, 1958) in a dialogic (Biesta, 2004; Freire, 2005) and transactional process (Sellman, 2009) with stakeholders. Hence, it was assumed that if student voice was to be heard and acted upon within the transformative framework proposed by close-to-practice research (albeit at the final stages of the study), all the stakeholders in the teaching and learning processes, including the students and their parents, needed to enter dialogic and transactional spaces in order to develop mutual understanding of the others' position and reality within the organization, then, together facilitate meaningful changes in the school to enable the performance gap to be addressed.

Given the bounded conditions of the study, a mixed-methods deductive and then inductive approach (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006) was devised that first enabled the researchers to contextualize the Ofsted findings and recommendations in a literature review of seminal articles, policy documents and research undertaken already in this area. Thematic analysis of data would provide a foundation from which the priorities and questions set by Academy *x* could be addressed specifically through more inductive methods. The overall question set by Academy *x* was: What are the key enablers of, and barriers to, raising the attainment levels of disadvantaged male students?

The term 'attainment' was understood by Academy *x* leaders and teachers as largely, but not wholly, related to academic progress, although there was some difference in understanding of these terms. In the primary school, attainment related to students' holistic development based on their individual capabilities, in addition to Fischer Family Trust data. In the secondary school, student attainment related primarily to academic performance indicators drawn from tri-annual Raising Achievement tests, National Foundation for Educational Research and Fischer Family Trust data collated in primary school. Thus, student academic attainment was located within generalized data sets related to their age, cohort and socio-economic status. Further questions that formed the aims of the study were therefore:

1. What are the key enablers of, and barriers to, raising the attainment levels in line with the above definitions for disadvantaged boys in Academy *x*?
2. How can Academy *x* facilitate and support these boys' improvement?

Specifically, the literature review explored key challenges and barriers, as well as effective and successful practices currently employed in policy, schools and local authorities. Four broad themes emerged (aspiration, motivation, support and curriculum) that framed discussions held in eight focus groups carried out with a range of stakeholders who participated in the boys' learning at home and school. Focus groups enabled a number of people to be interviewed simultaneously, and the responses of individuals in groups were used to stimulate the responses of others (see Table 1). Questions posed were also adjusted to the position of each stakeholder in the boys' education:

Aspiration:

- Students: What do you want to do or be when you are older?
- Parents: What are your ambitions and expectations for your child in school and beyond?
- Leaders: How does the culture and ethos in school support high aspiration (particularly on transition), parental engagement, student voice, careers advice and guidance in order to diminish difference?

Table 1: Focus group questions

Influencing factor	Stakeholder group	Examples of questions asked
1. Aspiration	Students	What do you want to do or be when you are older? On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being 'a lot'), how much does your mum or dad talk with you about your future?
	Parents	What are your ambitions and expectations for your child in school and beyond? How do you talk to your child about yours and their future plans?
	School leaders	How does the culture and ethos in school support high aspiration (particularly on transition), parental engagement, student voice, careers advice and guidance in order to diminish difference?
2. Motivation	Students	What do you like doing most at school? On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being 'a lot'), how important are getting good marks or GCSEs to you?
	Parents	Describe you own journey through school (that is, schools attended and experiences of learning). Describe your child's journey.
	School leaders	To what extent do school leaders support all teachers to deliver quality first teaching that enables effective inclusion?
3. Support	Students	Think of a subject or lesson you do really well in. What do teachers do that helps you learn the most? Think of a subject or lesson you don't do so well in. What do you think is stopping you from doing well in that subject or lesson? How, if at all, do parents help you with your homework or other learning at home?
	Parents	How do you support your child's learning at home? What, if any, do you think are the barriers to your child's learning in school and at home? What are your views about the school and its pastoral and academic support and expectations for your child?
	School leaders	How do you identify the students most at risk of underachieving, and what mechanisms do you have in place to ensure effective early help plans are subsequently established? How do you prioritize the outcomes for disadvantaged students and those with SEND? What, if any, are the long- and short-term plans you have to address outcomes for disadvantaged students and those with SEND and, in particular, males? How do school leaders use the pupil premium and devolved SEND funding to support disadvantaged male students?
4. Curriculum	Students	What do you most like learning about in school? What do you most like doing at home or outside school?
	Parents	What kind of learning do you think is most important for you to support your child with (for example, social, life skills, academic)?
	School leaders	What curricula do you have in place that best meet the needs of male students in order to diminish difference?

Motivation:

- Students: On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being 'very'), how important are getting good marks or GCSEs to you?
- Parents: Describe you own journey through school.
- Leaders: To what extent do school leaders support all teachers to deliver quality first teaching that enables effective inclusion?

Support:

- Students: What do teachers do that helps you learn the most?
- Parents: How do you support your child's learning at home?
- Leaders: How do school leaders use the pupil premium funding to support disadvantaged male students?

Curriculum:

- Students: What do you most like learning about in school?
- Parents: What kind of learning do you think is most important for you to support your child with (for example, social, life skills, academic)?
- Leaders: What curricula do you have in place that best meet the needs of male students in order to diminish difference?

These questions framed the exploration into key challenges, barriers and successful actions and pedagogies related to closing the attainment gap and/or raising attainment for disadvantaged male students at Academy *x*. In-depth individual interviews were then carried out with 21 participants to consider these factors further. A rich, holistic understanding of the leadership and pedagogic practices, as well as other key factors, would therefore emerge that would address the aims of the study.

In keeping with the close-to-practice research notion that our research should then 'support the application of critical thinking and the use of evidence in practice' (BERA, 2017), and that students might become participants in making meaningful changes that addressed the findings, a report was prepared ready for dissemination at the staff CPD training day. Here, the co-author of this article was to establish a research learning community that would enable staff, school leaders, students and parents to collaborate in the design of an intervention that responded to the findings.

Unfortunately, the project did not reach the final stage, and the opportunity for vital action and learning was lost. We use the remainder of this article, therefore, to explore how these findings simultaneously represented real-life political barriers to facilitating student voice, and how our research methods and approach to working with schools might be addressed in future.

Participant profiles

The primary school head teacher and secondary school assistant head teacher selected a purposive sample of boys across KS1–4. Each met the following criteria:

- currently attended the academy up to and including Year 10
- identified as disadvantaged (pupil premium funded)
- selected from a cohort that had the lowest average subject point score across all subjects based on the academy 2017/18 data sets.

Boys who fell outside these criteria were not included in the research. The range of stakeholders included in the research (n=48) were students, parents of the student participants, school leaders and teaching staff. These are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Stakeholder groups

Stakeholder group	Number of participants
Senior leaders KS1, KS2	2
Subject leaders KS1, KS2	6
Parents of KS1, KS2 students	6
Parents of KS4 students	1
KS4 students	10
KS3 students	9
KS2 students	3
KS1 students	5
Middle leaders KS3, KS4	4
Senior leaders KS3, KS4	2

Ethical considerations

Ethical processes were carried out in accordance with the University of Portsmouth ethics review board and GDPR 2018. In particular, all participants provided consent for the anonymized use of their data for future REC-approved research and publication purposes, as well as for conferences and teaching. There was no obligation by Academy *x* leaders to accept or implement the recommendations of the report, or to facilitate the training days.

Key findings

Literature review

The literature review identified a range of contributing factors that provided a general framework from which to explore the perspectives of stakeholders at Academy *x*. These were: (1) low student and parent aspiration (Stahl, 2014); (2) feeling undervalued in the classroom (Reay, 2006; House of Commons, 2014); (3) inappropriate curriculum (Demie and Lewis, 2014); (4) language barriers (House of Commons, 2014; Demie and Lewis, 2014); (5) poverty and parental engagement with their child's learning (King and Welch, 2012; Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011); and (6) wider social conditions including transition from KS2 to KS3 (Edwards, 2018; Farouk, 2017). The findings sat within four broad themes that were found to influence disadvantaged boys' attainment – aspiration, motivation, support and curriculum.

The findings also showed that low attainment did not primarily coincide with economic disadvantage, but it was found to coincide with working-class and minority cultural groups, many of whom also experienced economic disadvantage. Neither was there a specific causal factor that influenced all boys' low attainment. However, these contributing factors did coincide with one or more of these themes, which together influenced disadvantaged boys' attainment, and which guided the focus group and interview questions (see the examples in the previous section). Further, Farouk (2017) and Edwards (2018) located male students' low attainment, poor behaviour and exclusion more generally in wider stages of adolescent development and the construction of a viable self-narrative that also coincided with boys' transitions from primary to secondary school. Therefore, focus groups and interviews also contextualized stakeholders' perspectives of disadvantaged males' attainment, attitudes and learning

within the processes of constructing and maintaining a self-narrative framed within these four themes.

Focus groups and interviews

The findings showed that motivation and aspirations to gain GCSEs and a good job were intrinsic enablers to these students' attainment. However, factors such as appropriate pedagogic approaches, parental input, curriculum design and support were central to maintaining their motivation and aspirations. These factors were explored in depth during interviews, drawing on the focus group questions as a guide. In line with the approach taken with focus groups, each stakeholder was interviewed using language they understood. For example, for question (1), students in KS1–2 were asked: 'what do teachers do in class that you think helps you learn the most?' Thematic analysis of data now allowed key findings to be framed as either *barriers* or *enablers* to attainment in line with the study aims.

Barriers to attainment

Focus on self-responsibility for learning, rather than early recognition of disadvantage

School leaders in KS3–4 explained that students' work was differentiated within a single form entry into the school, and individual attainment gaps subsequently identified through tri-annual Raising Achievement tests, which were compared with Fischer Family Trust and National Foundation for Educational Research data compiled throughout KS1–2. Individuals falling short of their expected attainment grades, which was the case for all the student participants, were initially supported through one-to-one mentor discussions with teachers, and then through nurture groups or an alternative curriculum delivered in an off-site inclusion unit following exclusion from classrooms for poor behaviour. However, setting was discouraged in KS1–2 to reduce feelings of competition and failure among students. Rather, disadvantaged students' needs were addressed within: (1) systems already in place; and (2) teacher knowledge of each individual.

   Subsequently, the students felt that too much responsibility for raising their attainment was being placed on them. Charlie (KS3) explained:

> Now I'm in secondary nearly every day, you'll hear a person say to you …
> you're an adult now, you're not concentrating … you're a teenager now,
> you should be, like, be able to control yourself and stuff like this, obviously
> you're meant to be well behaved but saying that we're now like grown up
> its just a bit far.

High aspirations and motivation, but an inappropriate and demotivating curriculum

Findings highlighted that student aspirations were, in contrast to the findings of the literature review, high, albeit unrealistic and broad, in KS1–2 (for example, goals included being footballers for Real Madrid). KS3–4 students' aspirations were more specific, but still high (for example, engineer, pilot), emphasizing the importance of high academic attainment. Yet some KS3–4 school leaders and teaching staff said low attainment was largely down to individual student choice and low aspiration, and a lack of motivation or stamina. However, the findings from focus group questions related to

'aspiration' and 'motivation' showed that this perceived apathy was to some extent a response to a curriculum that was meaningful to some students but not to others:

> It's just like work with animals like and, kind of, I've just loved animals all my life and done lots of things as well, but the problem is they have like music and if you don't wanna be a musician, it's like a waste of an hour … It's like some lessons are a waste. (Kieran, KS3)

There was also a growing disillusionment towards the value of curriculum content in KS4:

> It's like the government and no one tells you this the earth's people resources it's not like oil and stuff it's like civilians like without normal people working for the people in hierarchy, then there's no such thing as society. They don't care about you individually, they just care about what you get to provide society. (Olu, KS4)

Hence, unfulfilled aspirations due to inappropriate curriculum had impacted the students' motivation to learn specific subjects.

Misperception of poor behaviour as individual deficit

School leaders viewed poor classroom behaviour that coincided with the frustrations felt by these students as the primary factor that had led to their lower attainment. Consequently, low attainment was largely addressed through interventions that offered a more informal approach to learning, but that focused on addressing poor behaviour rather than on curricular issues or those related to disadvantage. Hence, a key intervention at Academy x in the form of an inclusion unit that addressed low attainment had become stigmatized as a place for students who all had poor behaviour, rather than as a site in which wider systemic, social or curricular issues might be addressed. Martin in KS4 had attended the unit on a number of occasions and, although he recognized the staff as helpful and kind, he explained:

> if you're putting all the worse behaved people, all the class clowns and that, all together in one classroom, it's just gonna be like a, like a bit of a mess, because they're gonna be even worse behaved and it's just gonna get them into more trouble so … the problem is getting out and it's really hard, so I think a lot of people just give up in the end, and they just accept that they're there.

Enablers of attainment

Pedagogic approaches supporting preferred learning styles

Participants were asked what pedagogic actions they thought had successfully closed the attainment gap for disadvantaged boys. All seven parents interviewed were unsure, but students in KS1–2 identified experiential and play-based learning activities. For example, Olu and Harry in KS2 described a 'risky teaching' lesson that explored the theme of anarchy and involved the teacher suddenly leaving the room for 20 minutes.

In KS3–4, extra time in SATs tests, revision skills that helped with rote learning and teachers who took a more relational pedagogic approach, and who knew and encouraged students personally, were specifically recognized. Martin in KS4 explained:

in Year 9, I did the best at science 'cos I had this teacher who was like, always used to encourage me, and he used to be like nice to me as well. He understood what I was good at and what I wasn't, and he sort of gave me confidence as well and made me feel as if I was good at the subject, and I think that's an important thing to have in a teacher.

Parental support with learning at home

All the students said that their parents encouraged them to study and complete homework. Specifically, unemployed or low-income parents of students in KS1–2 supported their children with their homework, but parental support changed as the boys moved through KS3–4. Martin and Kanu, in KS4, explained that their mothers would either tell them to do their homework and not help, or try to help but not understand. Alfie in KS3 explained:

I either get my Grandad to come and help me, 'cause like he's really smart, he helped me when I was in primary, this primary with my maths, 'cause that's why I'm quite good at it, or I go to my Nans and then my cousin comes and she can help me, and that 'cause she's at university or college.

School leaders' responses corresponded with these findings, although they also recognized the impact of parental input on student motivation and attainment, despite their limitations.

Recognition of student achievement and home–school collaboration

During the interviews, three boys in KS1–2 said that postcards to their parents explaining their achievements, and teacher guidance in class had made them feel more motivated to learn in school and at home. Boys in KS3–4 said Individual Education Plans, Personal Support Plans and attendance at the inclusion unit were useful and helped them re-engage their learning, despite the stigma attached to it. Specifically, the boys in KS3 said that once they achieved good marks and these were recognized by teachers, it built their confidence and motivated them to try harder. Imon explained: 'Yeah, like when you get A* for one, you think you can get A* for all of them.'

Students in KS3–4 said that their motivation to succeed also increased when their parents were called in to meet school staff to discuss issues leading to their low attainment or when their grades were low. Here, though, despite their disillusionment with GCSEs, some of the students in KS4 primarily responded to their parents', rather than teachers', wishes and desire for them to succeed.

Analysis

The findings show that each stakeholder viewed learning and student attainment as: (1) a holistic process and not simply a cognitive function; (2) an activity that extended beyond the school site into the home; and (3) a collaborative process. However, support for disadvantaged boys' attainment was held in tension between institutional constraints and expectations of school leaders, parental ability and availability, home–school communications and student disadvantage, educational needs and disabilities. Moreover, the findings also show that spaces in which stakeholders could discuss these tensions in order to develop collaborative ways forward appeared to diminish between KS2 and KS4. The voice of each stakeholder (particularly that of the boys) was subsequently heard less, while pressure to raise attainment increased towards the time of GCSE exams.

Each stakeholder had attempted to create a pathway to raise attainment, and developed interventions to enable this, but from a reactive, rather than a proactive position. For example, parents provided tutor support at home, teachers provided mentoring for the boys, leaders provided nurture groups, individual support plans, and an inclusion unit supported boys with an alternative, relational approach and more holistic curriculum. However, there was little evidence of these approaches converging or working together coherently throughout KS1 to KS4, or the boys' perspectives being listened to in ways that might inform this process. Indeed, as Martin explained, attendance at the inclusion unit was viewed negatively from the students' perspectives. Although teachers and their support at the unit were valued, students wanted to get out as soon as possible. However, escape seemed futile. Here, the purpose and perceptions of the inclusion unit were mixed and confused, although the findings seem to suggest it may have been designed as a means of keeping disruptive students away from their more compliant peers until school leaders were satisfied that compliance could be achieved.

Consequently, although support strategies employed by each stakeholder enabled the boys' attainment to some extent, an underlying negative view of low attainment had emerged that located failure to meet required grades as individual deficit. Academic failure and disadvantage that impacted boys' ability to attain higher grades was subsequently becoming stigmatized (from students' perspectives) by these processes and a key barrier to their attainment.

Discussion: Dissemination of findings refused

In response to these findings, the following recommendations were made to the head teachers of the primary and secondary schools for comment prior to the staff training day:

1. Extend the inclusive culture underpinning the whole school ethos, such that it recognizes disadvantage, which is often beyond the control of the boys and parents.
2. Develop relational spaces across school, community sites and family homes that enable effective communication between students, peers, staff and parents in order for disadvantaged boys to express their perspectives on learning and the support they might need.

The primary school head teacher responded favourably to these recommendations, but the secondary school head teacher expressed some concerns about perceived inaccuracies in the report that might lead to a negative reputation for the school if the findings were to be made public. Concerns were:

1. The report presented some confusion around the purpose of the inclusion unit, but the students interviewed were from the nurture groups, which were not related to the inclusion unit. The two had become muddled and were inaccurately represented.
2. The participants were low-attaining and disadvantaged boys, but there was not enough representation of middle-attaining disadvantaged boys who were underachieving in relation to their perceived ability.
3. The support for parents needed to be measured and moderated, as presenting data from one parent out of over 1,200 families from the secondary school was not a sound basis for drawing conclusions.

The report had been accurate, though, inasmuch as the students had been chosen by school leaders and the voices and perspectives of a range of participants, particularly students, was representative. Moreover, some of the participants' comments had been far more negative about these processes and interventions than those that had been included in the report. Nonetheless, views about the purpose of the inclusion unit stood juxtaposed, and seemed to engender as emotive a response from the head teacher as it had from the students. Further, in relation to point 3, the deputy head teacher had also forwarded invitations to parents of disadvantaged boys in KS3–4 to attend focus groups and interviews. When no responses were received, we forwarded questionnaires to parents of the boys in KS3–4 instead, but received none. Hence, the report was based on the findings from those who had participated.

During the interviews, all the school leaders, teachers, parents and students had welcomed the idea of working with students and parents to address conflicting perceptions that had become evident during the study. However, the secondary school head teacher had not participated in the study as she had cancelled a number of interviews. In addition, the head teacher requested further research in the form of focus groups/interviews that included a wider range of data from middle-attaining male students, in order to mitigate some of the findings. Also, opportunity to present and disseminate the research findings was passed over in favour of presenting only the findings from the literature review at the training day.

It seems that on developing this research, we had not taken into account factors that have been shown to influence whether educators will take on board and respond to research findings (Brown, 2013; Nutley *et al.*, 2007). These include the credibility of the sources of data and the nature of the messages that emerge from these. However, although the nature of close-to-practice research and other action research models (for example, participatory action research, Freire's dialogic inquiry) is that they support the application of critical thinking and the use of evidence in practice, listening to and responding to student voice does not imply naive acceptance that their perception of reality is true for all the participants. It does, however, require an inquiry habit of mind, and an openness to accept that changes could be made. This requires school leaders to open themselves up to a measure of risk – the sort of risk that is prevalent in any school as a learning organization (Schleicher, 2012). Yet, if this risk becomes positioned outside the frame of reference employed in their everyday professional judgements (Elliott, 2007: 155), it will be justifiably resisted on ethical grounds, and the sources of findings will be questioned. Indeed, in this study, the boys' perspectives on the inclusion unit did not fall within the secondary school head teacher's professional frame of reference, particularly as their being placed at the inclusion unit was seemingly based on the professional perception that poor behaviour had attributed to their low attainment as a moral deficit. Moreover, opportunity to clarify the purposes of this unit, and perhaps join the discussions in focus groups, was limited as the head teacher also cancelled interviews and did not participate in the study processes.

However, it is easy to blame and problematize institutional and professional attitudes and systemic failures, but perhaps the issue lay closer to home in our research methods – particularly as responsibility for ensuring socially just models of research lies with us as researchers. That is, if we take into consideration the informal education model in Freire (1972, 2005), which asserts that the student–educator relationship is reciprocal, and the view that action is the 'continuous negotiation with other through the construction in process of "transient accounts" as it unfolds in the process. The full story of "action" can only be pieced together after the event' (Elliott, 2007: 208).

Indeed, if Elliott (ibid.) is correct in his further claim that 'action involves initiating change in a social situation to bring about something new within the social relationships that constitute it', then our study ought to have: (1) initiated change from the outset; within (2) the context of all the relationships associated with the study. Here, perhaps we ought to have ensured collaboration between stakeholders and those involved in the social relationships that constituted any future actions at the beginning, rather than at the end, of the process. Establishing a research learning community at the beginning of the process would have enabled some training and understanding to develop that would bring students' and parents' voices into teachers' and school leaders' professional frames of reference from the outset. Thus, action would become an integral part of the research process that would extend the professional frame of reference to listen to each stakeholder's voice as a credible member of the learning community. In this sense, the story would unfold within communicative spaces (Biesta, 2004) in which speech and action could facilitate voice and transformation. Hence, not only would research become embedded in the actions of all stakeholders, but such a proposed approach might have challenged the head teacher to consider whether she was prepared to listen to and accept the students' perspectives of barriers to attainment, or make the choice to opt out of the process entirely and seek a more consultative approach that perhaps limited their voice to having a say.

Conclusions

Addressing such social inequalities, therefore, may well lie in promoting and developing approaches that mean, as researchers, we promote the participation of all stakeholders from the start of a project. This would mean that action-based research is understood to extend beyond the cycle of plan, act, observe and reflect, which can lead to adult-led responses and in turn limit students' participation to processes that end before making meaningful changes. Moreover, this approach would take steps to ensure that each perspective is understood and carefully considered within these processes, as the actions and voice of one will influence and impact the other. In this sense, there would be no opting out. Everyone would be in it together – as a learning *community*. Perhaps, therefore, our role as researchers is to develop knowledge exchange frameworks that train schools in the processes of organizational change and transformative research – a model that involves addressing mindsets, particularly about marginalized groups and who we want to listen to from the moment they invite us to carry out research. With this in mind, recent research carried out by the lead author is successfully implementing this process in a collaborative project in another school.

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