BREAKING SILENCES THROUGH COLLABORATIVE ACTIONS:
EXPLORING WAYS TO EMPOWER STUDENTS
WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

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SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
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ABSTRACT

Students with learning difficulties are said by many writers to be prohibited from having a valued learner identity and denied a voice in which to influence their educational circumstances. They are, it is argued, kept submerged in a 'culture of silence', where they are homogenised as a deficit category of learners and, therefore, perceived in a one-dimensional way. Such disabling barriers stem from practitioner assumptions and wider sociological influences, which are also part of this same culture. The by-products of this thinking have prevented practitioners from developing more interactive and enabling relationships with their students.

Starting with a commitment to listen to student views, and explore accessible, flexible and innovative ways in which to advocate these, the research reported in this thesis sought ways to address this agenda. Set in a further education college, five student co-researchers, four practitioner co-researchers and a facilitator co-researcher embarked on a year long project to learn how the same students could be supported in contributing to their own learning. Being a transparent account, the inquiry was also interested in exploring the difficulties of this endeavour and whether student empowerment would alter the relational dynamics and, therefore, practitioner roles. As the facilitator was instrumental in introducing these ideas, she also examined her own influential role. Data were generated from observations and co-researcher experiences of engaging with roles, body collages, student interviews, photo voice, journals, portfolios and reflective meetings. These exploratory processes and methods were predicated upon the ideological frameworks of the social model of disability and multiple intelligences theory.

The study revealed that renegotiated co-researcher roles and body collages were effective processes for enabling reciprocal engagement, causing students to empower themselves and leading practitioners to rethink in ways that had not been anticipated. These processes were also felt to be educationally effective in relation to curriculum aims. Whilst journals and lengthy meetings proved to be impractical and of little use, the reflective journal did prove to be an essential tool for the facilitator, allowing her to draw upon further evidence. The findings indicate that student voice can be raised through collaboration and forging relationships of trust and co-ownership.

The thesis concludes by arguing that silences were broken, not least since these collaborative actions are still being used in the particular context in ways that are conducive to everyday practices. Although time and commitment are needed, these are valuable strategies that other marginalised educational communities may benefit from adopting.
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Here’s to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They’re not fond of rules. And they have no respect for the status quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About the only thing you can't do is ignore them. Because they change things. They push the human race forward. And while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think that they can change the world, are the ones who do.

Steve Jobs (Apple Computer Inc.)
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INTRODUCTION

This thesis was inspired by my own experiences of educational difficulties both as a child, who spent a considerable amount of time in special education, and as an adult, who teaches students described to have learning difficulties\textsuperscript{1} in further education (FE). Such insights have enabled me to understand both the difficulties and frustrations learners feel, whilst also appreciating the many dilemmas and practicalities educators face on a day to day basis.

At the age of three I was diagnosed with Rhinitis and Otitis Media with Effusion, which affected my hearing (with this being extremely limited) and caused my speech and language development to be delayed. Despite corrective surgery, I spent most of my formal education desperately trying to catch up with peers. At nine years old I was assessed by an educational psychologist, who advised that I be placed in a special needs school. Two years later I returned to a mainstream high school, but was taught in a separate remedial block. These experiences taught me that despite having strengths in creative arts, these were of no real value compared to the core subjects of English, Maths and Science. It seemed that those of us that struggled with these educational priorities were thought to be a waste of time to teach and a drain on the resources - as what would we really amount to anyway? As a result, I always felt rather inadequate, denied a voice and the opportunity to showcase my intellectual strengths. Being influenced by this insider perspective, I returned to education in more recent years to work with disadvantaged young people in the FE sector. As a practitioner I have observed that although students with learning difficulties are integrated they are not fully included, as they continue to receive specialist provision and are not invited to actively contribute to their learning environments.

These personal insights motivated me to scrutinise these issues in more detail by carrying out research in a FE college. In Chapter 1 I begin my presentation of the study and its findings by briefly outlining what educational inclusion means and by adopting a principled approach; a position that

\textsuperscript{1} I use the term students with ‘learning difficulties’, as this is preferred by the UK self-advocacy movement (Walmsley and Johnson, 2003), although I acknowledge that people with ‘learning disabilities’ is the official term used in the Disability Discrimination Act (HMSO, 1995). The student co-researchers in this inquiry are purported to have ‘moderate learning difficulties’.
seeks to increase the participation of students, restructure cultures and extend these aspirations to all learners. I expound upon arguments calling to respond to diversity positively, especially engaging with marginalised students and drawing upon their views to create more enabling environments. Running parallel to these arguments are those of student voice, which reiterate that students with learning difficulties are indeed a silenced minority. It is believed that they are submerged in a culture of silence, where they are prohibited from creatively taking part in the transformations of their educational settings and thus prohibited from being. They are essentially denied a valued learner identity, perceived instead as a deficit homogenised category, where their voices are not sought. Such one-dimensional views are argued to stem from pathologies of silence, where educators are likewise submerged, being influenced by both overt and covert discriminative practices, to the degree where they fail to develop meaningful relationships with their students. From a principled approach, I realised that to attempt to break such silences, differences needed to be positively valued with more attention on increasing student participation and critical reflection about the (immediate) educational culture.

Thinking about possible ways to contest these educational practices and raise student status I introduce the social model of disability in Chapter 2. I explore this ideological framework as an avenue to challenge practitioner determinist worldviews and as a platform for students to empower themselves. This discussion reveals that people with learning difficulties are still developing ways to use emancipatory approaches, as narrative style research has tended to dominate voice activities; which is usually controlled by an external researcher and having little impact upon the social dynamics of the context. Moving away from this position, I present arguments that social relations and research production are instrumental to how disabling ideologies are constructed, suggesting that a self-advocacy group model/inclusive research is more progressive.

In Chapter 3 I extend this critical analysis further, by looking at collaborative approaches and accessible processes to elicit views and invite reflection. In an attempt to bring students and practitioners together, so that disabling circumstances might be a joint process of struggle, I examine cooperative inquiry. I propose that this approach, causing participants to become co-researchers, may encourage practitioners to rethink, as they reflect upon their practices and the culture of their working environment. By overseeing this inquiry, I review the role of a facilitator, as this necessitates introducing alternative ways of knowing (i.e. theoretical frameworks and methods) and bridging the
academic and practice divide. However, I argue that this might extend beyond bringing an educational community together, as relationships of trust may need to be established. The discussion moves on to look at how these relationships may be strengthened and the possible ways to value individual student voices and identity. I explore the second ideological framework of multiple intelligences theory and introduce the central theme of student learning preferences. I also introduce the central questions that directed this inquiry.

Turning to the design of the cooperative inquiry and accompanying accessible processes, I introduce the FE college where this was carried out and each of the co-researchers in Chapter 4. This is followed by my preliminary pilot study, drawing upon previous findings and lessons learnt to apply to this inquiry. Each method is discussed along with how this was employed. I explain that data generated from these processes are represented in co-researchers own responses and from my outsider observations. I then discuss case study analysis and how I applied this to interview data collected from practitioners. In attempts to maintain an inclusive ethos, I present the critical questions that guided my role and other outcomes of this endeavour and return to these again in Chapter 9.

Significant findings, according to co-researchers and my own interpretations are presented in Chapters 5 and 6, which were categorised into central themes. These were assessed in relation to observed actions indicative of proposed ideologies, general reflections and from direct commentary. Accessible and empowering ways for students to advocate their learning preferences (in and beyond college) are identified, which include: co-researcher roles, portfolios, body collages and photo voice. However reflective journals were deemed to be impractical tools. With no data to retrieve from practitioners about how they perceived their supportive roles, I returned to the college to conduct further interviews with them. In Chapter 7 I present these discussion findings. All the practitioners commented that aspects of the inquiry caused interruptions to their thinking, resulting in them reappraising their supportive roles. Further analysis revealed that deficit epistemologies were challenged, which the practitioners attributed to multiple intelligences theory (body collages) and co-researcher roles (equal status).

Pulling these three chapters together and returning to the literature and central questions, in Chapter 8 I discuss the importance of collaborative actions and how this has led to reciprocity, gain and empowerment. Indeed, co-creating spaces, where everyone is involved from the beginning with individual contributions being valued has impacted upon the educational community and contested
disabling assumptions. As an external facilitator I played a vital role in presenting alternative ways to work together and, by understanding the context, ideas that could be co-owned and allowed to evolve. I found that the mutually engaging tools of body collages and co-researcher roles enabled students to ‘speak up’ and practitioners to rethink. I refer to these processes as ‘reflexive mirrors’, as they revealed more than just the immediate reflections of students/practitioners, but encouraged them to critically examine their own reflections and the contextual circumstances constructing these. As they saw themselves and each other differently, relational dynamics were challenged, suggesting that making familiar relationships unfamiliar creates enabling conditions. I assert that such conditions caused co-researchers to move beyond inclusive dialogue, where they communed together, to become interdependent, relying upon one another to reconstruct new understandings.

I conclude, in Chapter 9, by reporting that student reflexivity is essential in FE and through accessible outlets students can be empowered to ‘speak up’ for themselves and become valuable consultants. But, these same processes must also engage all members of an educational community and encourage unfamiliar reciprocal relationships between them. I argue that it was through these reflexive mirrors that silences were broken.

I found the main challenges of this inquiry to do with practitioners making the time and showing commitment to voice work. Indeed, the educational community only came together once these crucial decisions had been collaboratively made. Such decisions seemed to have set the mutual agenda, as actions, from this point onwards, were openly discussed and shared. As a facilitator, I observed that while I was able to introduce alternative ideas and utilise my skills to assist in this partnership my role also created additional barriers. It was for these reasons that I learnt that my reflective journal was a reflexive asset, as it allowed me to be continually critical, and thus reposition myself accordingly. However, despite these difficulties, inquiry processes were deemed to be a worthwhile investment, as practitioners reported that these made them re-evaluate and provided them with greater educational insight. As such, their supportive roles evolved into intermediary roles, where they actively listened to students, valuing their input and perceiving them as colleagues rather than as a deficit category.

Although I identify the limitations of this inquiry as being specific to this FE context and exclusively with students with learning difficulties, I also acknowledge that this was an exploratory study and a springboard for further research. Indeed, I propose that these findings, particularly the development
of reflexive mirrors, may inspire other marginalised educational communities in their attempts to break silences.
CHAPTER 1. Submerged in cultures and pathologies of silence: background themes

Before learning about the nature of this inquiry and the FE context where this research was carried out, it is essential to understand more about the background themes that have influenced thinking and courses of action. In the discussion that follows, I identify the inter-connecting agendas of inclusive education and student voice and examine how these influences have impacted upon both international and national educational policies and practices. I evaluate how these principles have translated into the FE sector and more explicitly, how they have responded to students with learning difficulties. This discussion examines whether these students are being included (according to perspectives I present) and if their views are taken into account to inform their learning context. However, it is important to acknowledge that this is a brief overview, and not an extensive account of all the arguments surrounding these themes.

Inclusive education and the dilemmas of difference

Defining inclusion

There is much confusion about what is meant by ‘inclusion’, this being due to the diversity of assumptions and definitions attributed (Norwich, 2002) and that there is no one perspective within a single country or school (Booth and Ainscow, 1998). With this in mind, Ainscow et al (2006) having summarised relevant international literature, outline a typology of five ways of thinking about inclusion:

Perspective 1: Inclusion as focusing on disability and ‘special educational needs’; This remains the dominant perspective, that is primarily concerned with educating disabled students and others categorised as ‘having special educational needs’ in mainstream schools.

Perspective 2: Inclusion as reducing disciplinary exclusions; Associated with so called ‘difficult students’ exhibiting ‘bad behaviours’, often categorised as having emotional and behavioural difficulties and relates to their formal and informal disciplinary exclusions. As exclusion and inclusion are inextricably linked, the aim is to reduce exclusions by increasing opportunities for student participation e.g. specialised courses at FE colleges for excluded 14 yr olds.
Perspective 3: Inclusion as identifying groups vulnerable to exclusion; This is concerned with overcoming discrimination and disadvantage in relation to any groups of students who are vulnerable to exclusionary pressures (and indeed their local communities), where accessing school is under threat e.g. traveller children.

Perspective 4: Inclusion as promoting a common school for all; A single type of school that draws upon different approaches to teaching to serve a socially diverse community.

Perspective 5: Inclusion as education for all – widening participation; This is about increasing access to and participation within education (across the world); essentially, broadening the concept of ‘school’ and reaching out to diverse communities e.g. offender learning programmes.

The authors extend this thinking further by introducing a 6th perspective, which they argue is a ‘principled approach to education and society’, involving:

- **The processes of increasing the participation of students in, and reducing their exclusion from, the curricula, cultures and communities of local schools.**

- **Restructuring the cultures, policies and practices in schools so that they respond to the diversity of students in their locality.**

- **The presence, participation and achievement of all students vulnerable to exclusionary pressures, not just those with impairments or those who are categorised as ‘having special educational needs’** (p. 25).

Debates about these different ways of thinking have been further stimulated over the last twenty years or so by the ‘Education for All’ movement [United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) world conference held in Jomtein in 1990]; the Salamanca Statement on special needs education (UNESCO, 1994) along with a ‘rights’ agenda (e.g. Armstrong and Barton, 1999) and an argument for educational ‘effectiveness’ (see Ainscow, 1997). Such calls for inclusive educational improvement are united by efforts to eliminate exclusionary processes that come as a consequence of attitudes and responses to diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, religion and attainment (Ainscow, 2007a). This is particularly so with perspective 6, a position which builds upon common interests amongst these diverse groups of learners and how they are ‘subject to
exclusionary processes’ (Booth and Ainscow, 1998) - in other words their shared disadvantageous and discriminative experiences.

Norwich (2005) contends that while such a position can give some force to the case for a broad inclusivity in education, as a general abstract principle, it can ignore the important differences of experiencing exclusion. He argues that such a view can overlook the interests of students with severe and profound learning difficulties, suggesting that separate provision may serve their educational needs more effectively. Such debates about broad inclusion versus diverse need have led to what Norwich calls a ‘dilemma of difference’ (2002; 2005): “The dilemma is whether to recognise or not recognise difference, as both options have negative risks. Recognising difference can lead to stigma and devaluation; but not to recognise can lead to ignoring individual needs” (2005, p. 54). For students with learning difficulties the dilemmas are often associated with:

- Identification: whether to recognise and ascribe ‘special educational needs/disability’ categorisations.
- Curriculum: whether educational programmes should be common or specialised.
- Location: whether students would benefit from mainstream or separate settings (ibid).

For these reasons, inclusion has not been fully accepted and nor without criticism, especially amongst disability-focused organisations who continue to campaign for separate ‘specialist’ services (Ainscow, 2007a). Addressing Individual needs has come to mean, for example, students being removed from mainstream classes and placed into smaller units within the same school; units that provide specialist knowledge, equipment and support (ibid). However, despite this remaining the dominant practice, it has been argued that there is no empirical evidence to substantiate a separate ‘special needs pedagogy’ (Ainscow, 2006 citing Davis et al, 2004 and Lewis and Norwich 2005). Additionally, Oliver (1996) argues that individuals (or for the purposes of this review, students) identified as having learning difficulties are offered rehabilitation; a perspective he refers to as the ‘individual model of disability’. Barnes et al (1999, p. 26) expounds upon this further: “The individual model presumes that ‘disability’ takes over the individual’s identity and constrains ‘unrealistic’ hopes and ambitions [...] individuals are socialised into a traditional disabled role and identity, and expected to submit to professional intervention in order to facilitate their adjustment to their ‘personal tragedy.’” I return to this argument in the following chapter.
‘Individual needs’ or ‘personalisation’ is viewed negatively, reflecting lower status, less value and perpetuating inequalities and unfair treatment (Norwich, 2002). However, it must be stressed, that despite ‘creating barriers to progress’ (Ainscow et al., 2006), specialist provision is often prescribed to with good intentions. For example, Johnstone (1995, p. 107) argues: “For teachers who have worked in segregated special educational systems for a number of years it can only come as a shock to realise that they are considered by their critics to be perpetuating a kind of educational apartheid; that despite their best endeavours to serve they have, in fact, been preparing children and students for segregated lives in the future.” This last point about segregated lives becomes even more significant when I discuss FE provision below. Nevertheless, however well intentioned this preoccupation with individualised responses, based upon ‘specialist’ supports, Ainscow (1997) asserts that this continues to deflect attention away from practices that can reach out to all learners within a class and to the establishment of school conditions that can encourage such developments.

Such an inclusive position, it is argued, is radical as it requires everyone’s needs to be taken into consideration, since “It seeks to engage with the question of belonging and solidarity, and simultaneously, recognises the importance of the politics of difference” (Barton, 1998, p. 215 cited by Armstrong and Barton, 1999). Essentially, this perspective moves away from individual (deficit) needs, to responding positively to diverse learner characteristics and circumstances, where difference is seen as a valuable resource (Ainscow et al., 2006). However, Ainscow (2008), and more recently, Miles and Ainscow (2011), acknowledge that responding to diversity in this way is the biggest challenge facing educational systems.

Viewing diversity positively

Running through the debates about inclusive education are various perspectives on diversity. So, for example, it has been argued that approaches need to be developed that will lead practitioners to respond to student diversity positively, seeing individual differences not as problems to be fixed, but rather as opportunities to enrich learning (Ainscow, 1999). Oliver (2008, p. 276) refers to this philosophy as the “politics of personal identity”, arguing that difference should not be merely tolerated and accepted but that it be positively valued and celebrated. Alternatively, Shields (2006) proposes that difference needs to be seen as being ‘normal’ i.e. part of who we are. Barton (1997, p. 235) extends this thinking further, calling for “a vision of democracy through difference”:
Difference is now to be viewed as a challenge, a means of generating change and an encouragement for people to question unfounded generalisations, prejudice and discrimination. The challenge needs to be viewed in terms of excluded groups themselves, as well as a means of questioning and changing the perspectives of dominant groups. It involves a fundamental task, that of developing a vision of democracy through difference.

Cummings et al (2003) argue that a ‘democracy through difference’ must not only welcome and value all learners, but must also overcome disadvantage and reduce material inequalities in society. They propose that learning environments are good places to start, as “barriers there go on to generate both discriminatory attitudes and the more material forms of discrimination which arise from the denial of opportunities for accreditation” (p. 51). In this sense, viewing diversity positively, requires fundamental changes in educational practice and organisation i.e. an ‘organisational paradigm’ (Dyson and Millward, 2000) which moves away from learner-centred explanations of individual educational failure and turns instead upon an analysis of barriers to student participation and learning experiences (see also Booth and Ainscow, 2002 and Ainscow, 2007a). But this vision also extends beyond ‘barriers’ to address issues of curriculum, pedagogy, resourcing and achievement (Cummings et al, 2003).

It would seem student presence is not enough, however, as learners must be actively involved in shaping their educational communities (Dyson and Millward, 2000) Ainscow (2007a, p. 146) contends: “In this way, those students who do not respond to existing arrangements come to be regarded as ‘hidden voices’ who, under certain conditions can encourage the improvement of schools”. Indeed, engaging with marginalised students is essential to creating an inclusive environment, to developing varied approaches towards learning and creating socially diverse communities. It would seem, only under these ‘certain conditions’ that communities can continually challenge educational infrastructures and wider societal understandings. Furthermore, by students playing a more active role, providing valuable insights into their learning experiences, it would suggest that their involvement has the potential to be transformative.
Student voice

Running parallel to this analysis of eliciting hidden voices to aid in educational improvement is a more general call for ‘student voice’, described as ‘a portmanteau term’ (Fielding, 2009) to define pupil, learner and student views. I mainly use the term ‘student voice’, although pupil, learner and children are used interchangeably in the analysis presented below.

Defining student voice

Student voice has come to mean: “Empowering learners by providing appropriate ways of listening to their concerns, interests and needs in order to develop educational experiences better suited to those individuals” (Rudd et al, 2007, p. 8). Fielding (2008, p. 2), maintaining this view that practitioners should facilitate opportunities, asserts that it is about: “Listening purposefully and respectfully to young people in the context of formal education”. Seeking student views in this way is said to be integral to the idea of inclusive education, as it is about increasing student participation by involving them in planning and decision making (Czerniawski et al, 2009). Rudd et al (2007) argue that when students have a voice and an influence on decisions and outcomes, they are more likely to be engaged with their learning.

The student voice agenda gained momentum around the early 90s, being influenced by changing ideologies of childhood and the children’s rights movement. Such perspectives have challenged adult assumptions about dependency and immaturity, advocating instead for children to ‘have a say’ in processes that affect their lives (Rudduck and Flutter, 2000). In this sense, “childhood should be regarded as a part of society and culture rather than a precursor to it; and that children should be seen as already social actors not beings in the process of becoming such” (Rudduck and Flutter, 2000, p. 81 citing James and Prout 1997).

Czerniawski et al (2009, p. 7), when referring to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child policy (UNCRC, 1989), state: “In this framework children are seen as autonomous individuals, social actors with agency deserving respect and consideration but also, in need of protection and provision.” With formal education playing a pivotal role in their social development, it is essential that student voices be heard and that they be encouraged to express their opinions freely and enabled to participate in decision making processes in their educational settings and wider
Fielding (2007a, p. 332 citing Rudduck and McIntrye, 2007) states that the underlying philosophy is “a broader, more generous view of the kinds of learning we value in pupils and the kinds of experience that help build a commitment to learning that will endure beyond school.” Although initially from a rights perspective, student voice has become a moral responsibility, as educators are expected to incorporate voice activities into their curriculum. Indeed, Rudduck et al (2006) argue that educators can benefit from student perspectives as they gain a better understanding and that strengthening this student-teacher relationship should be the impetus, rather than a duty. Fundamentally, and returning to the issue of transformation, they (p. 36) assert that, “the most powerful evidence about changing teaching and learning is coming from the students” (e.g. Scott et al, 2010). Hence practitioners can learn from student views, but only if they are receptive to students as social actors and see them as legitimate sources of ‘insider’ experience and creativity. In which case, educators can become facilitators, drawing upon techniques that initiate dialogue encouraging participation and active listening. Approaches that are often used to elicit such views include: individual interviews, group interviews, surveys, questionnaires, observations, forums, councils, suggestion boxes, ideas booths, listening posts, graffiti walls (Czerniawski et al, 2009) – all which rely heavily upon linguistic competencies. More recently, methods have been developed that explore visual, creative and technological stimuli, including collages, photography (photo-voice/photo-elicitation), drawing, scrap booking, logs, blogs, toys, drama (role plays), audio recording and chat rooms (ibid). It would seem the employment of these different processes of engagement is just as imperative as the responses gained from them (Fielding, 2004).

**The challenges of student voice**

The growing interest in student voice in recent years has led to considerable debate regarding the challenges involved. For example, despite its democratic underpinnings, Flutter and Rudduck (2004) and Fielding (2004) question whether all student voice projects are driven by this same philosophy, as successive governments have focused on an achievement culture, characterised by performance targets, outcomes and schools positioning in performance league tables. In turn, consultation is often driven by institutional self-interest (Rudduck and Fielding, 2004) to raise standards, rather than social and personal development (Fielding, 2004). It would seem that students are often consulted through tokenistic means, usually in the form of questionnaires, which are organisationally devised, focusing
upon educational delivery and led by practitioners. Student voice is then used as an assessment tool, with the students being consumers rather than active contributors (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004).

At the other extreme, concerns have been raised about student voice going too far, as students have been invited to monitor practitioner effectiveness and have had active roles on interviewing panels to vet prospective teachers (e.g. Times Educational Supplement, 14th August, 2009). There is also apprehension about students venturing into educator territory, as professional status and responsibilities become somewhat blurred as students attempt to take on these roles.

Czerniawski et al (2009, p. 15) argue that when deliberating over these issues a fundamental question needs to be addressed: “Is it in the learner’s interest?” Further on in their discussion about these contemporary challenges, these authors observe: “Another key issue is that of inclusiveness. Efforts should be made to include hard to access and marginalised groups, such as looked after children and children with disabilities.” Centrally, this is about accessibility, as ‘voice’ is often limited to the literal sense of speaking. Rudduck and Fielding (2006, p. 227) assert: “The problem is that consultation assumes a degree of social confidence and of linguistic competence that not all students have, or feel they have.” It would seem that an over reliance on linguistic capabilities, and with it traditional methods, has led to the prevention of students with learning difficulties from having a voice. Rudduck and Fielding, exploring this further, argue: “The more self-assured and articulate students may dominate consultative conversations and be more readily ‘heard’ by teachers but it is the silent-or-silenced-students who find learning in school uncongenial whom we also want to hear from” (p. 228).

### Inclusive education and student voice in FE

So far I have argued that the notion of inclusive education remains a matter of debate and, indeed, dispute in the field internationally. I have also indicated a growing interest in using the views of learners as a means of fostering inclusive developments. Contemplating these overlapping themes, I now go on to explore how they have influenced thinking and practice in the FE sector, particularly in relation to responses to young adults with learning difficulties.
Responding to students with learning difficulties in FE

Over recent years successive governments have been eager to encourage more inclusive practices and to respond to diversity in the FE sector [i.e. Department of Education and Skills (DfES) 2006]. There has also been encouragement to develop student voice initiatives. To assist FE providers in incorporating these policies into practice, the Learning and Skills Council [(LSC), 2007] produced a handbook, ‘Developing a Learner Involvement Strategy’. It states, “Learner involvement covers a wide variety of practices that seek to enable, equip and motivate learners to voice their views and actively shape their learning” (p. 6). Although this provides a framework and poses questions to be considered about possible ways forward, the strategy encourages institutional discretion.

No matter how learner views are to be elicited, the LSC emphasises the need for a coordinated approach, thus encouraging practitioners to rise to the challenge of tackling educational barriers, driving improvements through direct consultations with students. Such initiatives stem from the debate that developing democratic communities within educational contexts is an exploratory process that needs to be practiced. This calls for practitioners to create opportunities whereby students can become agents of change, making fundamental decisions and having a larger stake in their own learning. In cultivating such approaches, where students and practitioners feel comfortable working together to review provision and make necessary changes, there is an expectation that they will evoke change and transcend beyond formal education.

In an attempt to respond to such arrangements, the Learning and Skills Development Agency [(LSDA), 2006] produced guidance entitled, ‘Nothing about me, without me: involving learners with learning difficulties or disabilities’. These guidelines show examples of how students might be directly involved in projects, through accessible methods, and influence the quality of their own provision. This was produced in the light of the Disability Discrimination Act, Part 4. As such, new duties were enforced in Further Education from 2002 onwards, and the following 2005 Act (HMSO), rather than as a result of arguments for democratic reforms.

In 2007 the Learning and Skills Research Centre (LSRC) produced further guidelines, ‘Being, having and doing’, to aid practitioners in personalising educational support for students with learning difficulties, in which they advocate that students should be at the centre of the learning process, this being tailored according to their needs and aspirations. Such recommendations seem to imply a shift...
in the balance of power between students and practitioners, by enabling students to have a greater say in the planning and design of their own learning.

Cultures and pathologies of silence

My own view is that such initiatives, whilst undoubtedly being a positive move, are unlikely to empower students if they fail to encourage educators to question their own attitudes towards students. Furthermore, my impression is that they have had little impact on practice. Indeed, there is still ambiguity and confusion about how to respond to diversity and how to promote student voice in meaningful and accessible ways. More specifically, my impression is that many in the FE sector have embraced the rhetoric of inclusive ideals without understanding and addressing disabling epistemologies and practices. As a result, practitioners are left feeling perplexed about their responsibilities and tend to become tokenistic in their desperation to adhere to external guidelines and institutional pressures to be seen to be taking account of their recommendations.

Working creatively in partnership with students has become an idealistic notion that has tended to fall by the wayside, as too many intrinsic barriers prevent this from being explored. It is this practitioner-professionalism, and the existence of barriers shrouded in hegemony and modernist knowledge, that thwart students’ subjective worlds from being accessed (Gibson, 2006). As Rose and Shevlin (2004) argue: “The voices of young people from marginalised groups within society have tended to be ignored and patronised in educational decision making processes. This discourse of professionals and policy makers have assumed a dominant position” (p. 155). Consequently, and returning to earlier commentary, the voices of students with learning difficulties are so seldom heard that there is often what seems like a ‘culture of silence’ (Gibson, 2006; Whitehurst, 2006).

The notion of a ‘culture of silence’ originated from the educational philosopher Paulo Freire, who argues: “In ‘the culture of silence’ the masses are mute, that is, they are prohibited from creatively taking part in the transformations of their society and therefore prohibited from being” (Freire, 1983, p. 50). My professional experience has led me to believe that students with learning difficulties, perceived as a ‘deficit homogenous mass’ with no sense of individual identity, are “kept ‘submerged’ in a situation in which such critical awareness and response are practically impossible” (Freire, 1972, Forward). Furthermore, they are often prohibited from ‘being’, from recognising their subjected oppression and, as a result, are unable to emerge from it.
Wright (2006), being critical of FE provision for students with learning difficulties, asserts that descriptive terminology assumes homogeneity and a common set of educational requirements. In which case, it could be said that practitioners are likewise submerged in this same culture, unable to critically question disabling assumptions and organisational infrastructures that influence their practices. Shields (2004) refers to this as a ‘pathology of silence’, arguing that educators are influenced by both overt and covert discriminative practices to such an extent that they fail to develop strong relationships with their students – the very students that they need to be hearing from. Barton (2008) states that practitioners need to start by acknowledging that students with learning difficulties have deep feelings and emotions and are thus able to express views about their experiences. He argues: “We rarely approach such people in terms of their important insights, thus we have hardly begun to ‘know’ or ‘understand’ them [...] they demand, that we recognise them, not in terms of a single dimension, but as people who have rights and deserve our painstaking detailed attention” (p. 60).

Building upon this position, some authors have argued that the ideals of inclusive education are unlikely to succeed unless these young people are recognised for their individual contributions and are fully involved in the debate about educational purposes and processes (e.g. French and Swain, 2003; Shevlin and Rose, 2003; Rose and Shevlin 2004; Gibson, 2006 and Whitehurst, 2006). Whitehurst (2006, p. 60) expounds upon this further:

> It is their right and our obligation to ensure that when we talk about inclusion we take their views into account. To continue to maintain their silence is not only a travesty of justice but ignorance and arrogance, as professionals, to practice according to our own agenda, assuming we know what [students] want [...] we need their voices to inform our practice. We need to ensure that the voices, which have for so long remained silent, reach us, inform our practice and create a way of working which takes everyone’s views into account. Only then can we say we are truly working inclusively.

For too long it would seem, despite being a formal priority, inclusive thinking and policy has been a rhetoric and reality that has excluded these views (Gibson, 2006; Whitehurst, 2006). Gibson (2006, p. 232) asserts: The aims and objectives of inclusive education, policy and research are caught up in
political and cultural processes. There is a need to move forward in these aims, to genuinely listen to the voices of those currently being silenced but to do so in a way that acknowledges the tensions and complexities involved”.

Re-addressing inclusion before attempting to break silences

In order to understand more deeply why such ‘silences’ persist, despite educational initiatives and practitioner efforts, we need to examine how inclusive concepts are being interpreted and put into practice. Returning to the six inclusion perspectives (presented by Ainscow et al, 2006), it would seem that, in the main, the FE sector has embraced the concept of inclusivity as integrating students with learning difficulties in a mainstream setting and, therefore, adopting perspective 1. At the same time, they are also aspiring to be a college for all and reaching out to socially diverse communities (e.g. prison offenders) and thus applying perspectives 4 and 5. Exploring this further, all these approaches have been influenced by national policies, and in turn by local educational authorities, funding councils and the development of specialised programmes. One of the earliest of these, The Further Education Funding Council (which was replaced by the LSC in 2001) 1996 report ‘Inclusive learning’ (also known as the Tomlinson Report) was extremely influential in how students with learning difficulties were accommodated. Rustemier (2003, p. 134) states: “The report emphasises that students with learning difficulties should be seen primarily as learners, predating inclusive learning firmly on theories of learning and teaching, and on the identification of a student’s learning style. She asserts that the focus moved from viewing individual students negatively to matching the environment to their individual requirements. Rustemier continues (citing Tomlinson, 1997): “It is not a matter of who learns alongside whom, but matching the learning environment to the needs of the learning individual, whether this be in integrated or segregated provision.” As a result, Inclusive learning in the FE sector has meant keeping individuals together who require similar resources and levels of support. Essentially, going back to a segregated position, albeit more subtly, and reproducing further policies and guidelines that are built upon this premise.

Returning to my earlier point about segregated lives, this separation becomes commonplace throughout much of the lives of people with learning difficulties, as they spend most of their school years in specialist education – whether this be in another classroom (unit) or accessing separate provision altogether. Most students accessing FE are considered to be adult learners: a status that implies autonomy, maturity, independence and the ability to be self-reflective. As FE is not
compulsory, students are encouraged to know themselves, being self-aware, self-directional and self-motivated. However, for students with learning difficulties, who have been far removed from these progressive stages of education, they are still very much perceived as dependent, immature, and lacking a general sense of self-understanding. They seem to possess an all-consuming identity, which is fundamentally imposed by others (see Barton, 2000), thus keeping them in a sort of ‘static deficit hegemony’, where they are constantly striving for recognition of adult status.

Consequently, although students with learning difficulties are physically present on college campuses, spending their break times in the same communal areas as their peers, they are still very much segregated from them. Indeed, their presence and participation seems to function as a separate entity, as very little interaction happens between them and other non-disabled students. This tangible separation is further divided and, I would argue, fuelled by ‘pathologies of silence’, as practitioners genuinely believe that this separation is serving their best interests. Their integration, in so much that they are enrolled on FE courses, is not scrutinised any further, but instead goes unchallenged as so called inclusive aims are believed to be met. To illustrate this ‘culture of separateness’ that sustains cultures and pathologies of silence I draw upon my own context as an example: students with learning difficulties arrive to and from the college via privately hired taxes (with the exception of a few), they attend specially devised vocational programmes at pre-entry to entry levels that focus upon independent skills and are taught in classrooms away (almost out of sight) from the main body of the college. In addition, they receive one-to-one support from their tutor and other designated members of staff during class and break times.

Oliver (2009, p. 277 citing earlier work) argues: “integration is not a thing that can be delivered by politicians, policy makers or educators, but a process of struggle that has to be joined” (see also Barton, 1995; 1997; 1998; 2000; 2009). What then becomes significant about the FE sector is its potential to develop alternative inclusive ways of working, namely the adoption of perspective 6: a principled approach to education and society and the impact that these possesses might have in bridging this separation divide. Despite students with learning difficulties being denied a valued learner identity in FE, they are still, as a representative group, accessing the same facilities as their peers and other members of their local communities. In which case, a principled approach could stem from an integration position, as Johnston (1995, p. 108) claims “supporters of inclusive principles have argued that post-16 education is the most appropriate stage for the movement's fullest
realisation”, perhaps, because it can build upon perspectives 4 and 5, and increase student participation and restructure deficit educational cultures (Ainscow et al, 2006; see also Thomas and Gleeny, 2002; Oliver, 2009; Thomas and Loxley, 2009). Such processes imply turning away from disability standpoints, and those of deficit individual needs, turning instead towards questioning paradigms and proposing alternative inclusive approaches. Essentially, these processes need to challenge current policy maker and practitioner values, perceptions and the epistemological foundations upon which these are established.

Although I fully embrace the aspirations of a principled approach, as a practitioner-researcher I am bound by the policy factors in my working environment. As such, the students and practitioners I work with are ‘separate’ from other curriculum groups, meaning that any exploratory research attempting to ‘break silences’ is restricted by these exclusionary circumstances. However, this is perhaps where such approaches could start, since Hart (1992, p. 139) presents the compelling argument that:

> Learning difficulties can perform an important service on behalf of all [learners] by drawing attention to the possibilities for developments which might otherwise pass unnoticed. It is vital that we preserve awareness of this link in the interests of all [learners]. It not only opens up a wider range of opportunities for preventing and alleviating difficulties, but also ensures that the special insights which difficulties provide can be used as a stimulus for the development of education generally.

In which case, exploratory inquiry could initially begin with students with learning difficulties, examining accessible processes to elicit their voices whilst evaluating the impact this has upon practitioners, before examining similar processes with other marginalised communities.

**Conclusion**

I began this discussion by identifying educational inclusion through six perspectives and by recognising that there is a necessity to respond to student diversity positively. Running parallel to these arguments is a growing interest in the idea of listening to the views of students as a means of fostering inclusive developments. Connecting these two themes – inclusion and learner voice – I
have argued that there is a need to listen to the views of students with learning difficulties, as they are found to be a silenced minority. I then explored how these overlapping themes have been interpreted in the FE sector, drawing upon recent policy initiatives and further observations of practices. From this assessment, I found that although students are physically present in colleges, they are usually homogenised into a deficit category, where they are denied a voice and a valued learner identity. As their voices are seldom heard, it was argued that they are submerged in a culture of silence, which is influenced further by practitioner pathologies of silence. In this sense, practitioners are likewise submerged, as they are unaware that their practices, and indeed the wider sociological factors that influence these, are preventing meaningful relationships with their students. Drawing upon the perspective that sees inclusion as a principled approach to education, I proposed that silences may be broken by exploring processes that value differences, focusing more attention on increasing student participation and engaging educational communities in critical reflection.

Thinking about ways to challenge these disabling educational circumstances and to raise the voices of students with learning difficulties, I explore alternative ideologies and approaches in the following two chapters.
CHAPTER 2. Challenging cultures and pathologies of silence: exploring the social model of disability

Bringing forward the arguments from the previous chapter, there is a need to elicit the views of students with learning difficulties in FE and to perceive them as diverse learners. Currently, their voices are seldom heard, as they are said to be shrouded in a culture of silence. It was argued that their participation may be increased and, more fundamentally, valued if conditions were made to hear their views. However, practitioners are felt to be likewise submerged, through pathologies of silence; where they believe students need specialist/segregated provisions, due to their learning deficiencies. As such, it would seem these disabling epistemologies have prevented students with learning difficulties from ‘speaking up’ and from being perceived as autonomous adult learners.

In response, I propose that an alternative ideology needs to be explored to challenge these learning disabled perceptions. In this chapter, I draw upon the social model of disability, as this was created by the disability movement to expose disability as a form of social oppression and exclusion. In this sense, it is both a political tool to present an alternative paradigm and an avenue for emancipatory research (i.e. transformative). The discussion that follows, examines how the model was created, the criticisms that this has received and the potential to effect social conditions and understandings. I specifically analyse the inclusion of people with learning difficulties in these developments and explore ways in which they might accessibly utilise emancipatory approaches to empower themselves and invoke change to their learning circumstances.

Disability: a social creation

In the following sections I discuss how the social model of disability has dominated British disability studies, to the extent where it has become the premise upon which disability research is carried out. I discuss the philosophical origins that are believed to have inspired its development, how it was constructed and how the model is used as a political tool.

British disability studies

Disability, as a social product, is broadly understood as the mainstream exclusion of people with sensory, physical or intellectual impairments (i.e. people with learning difficulties). Disability studies
aims to interrogate and change the social building blocks that create and sustain a disabling world; these include political, economic, social, cultural, interpersonal, relational and discursive (Oliver, 1990; Goodley and Van Hove, 2005). Although bringing together international scholarship, disability studies is not just an academic discipline, but is also an emancipatory approach that is tied to the development of the disability movement (Campbell and Oliver, 1996), as it focuses upon praxis; the dual promotion of social theory and social change (Goodley and Van Hove, 2005 citing Lather, 1991).

In terms of British disability studies, where my attention is drawn, impairment and disability have been separated from one another in the development of what has been termed the ‘social model of disability’ (Barnes and Mercer, 2003; Goodley and Van Hove, 2005); a phrase coined by Michael Oliver in 1983 (Best, 2005; Barnes, 2009). But also known as the social barriers model (Finkelstein, 1993) and the social-political model (Barnes and Mercer, 2003). Thomas (2004, p. 21) states: “In a radical move, [the disabled people’s movement] severed the presupposed casual link whereby impairment resulted in disability, asserting instead that disability was an entirely socially caused phenomenon.” It emerged as a result of prevailing medical/individual models, which saw disabled people as ‘problems’ needing adaptive treatments (Tregaskis, 2002) and has since become the touchstone of disability studies in the UK (Thomas, 2004). The model was developed to reclaim disability terminology from professionals in medicine and social care (Campbell and Oliver, 1996), and to expose this as a form of social oppression and exclusion, as Thomas (2004, p. 21) expounds: “Disability was reformulated to mean the social disadvantageous and exclusions that people with impairment faced in all areas of life: employment, housing, education, civil rights, transportation, negotiation of the built environment, and so forth.”

Social construction of reality

The philosophical origins of the social model are believed to be rooted in work of Berger and Luckmann (Best, 2005), who argue that ‘reality’ is socially constructed and that the sociology of knowledge must analyse the process in which this occurs (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). They define reality “as a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognise as having a being independent of our own volition” (p. 13). In other words, reality is not an objective truth out there, but rather it is socially/internally constructed, through our communications, thoughts and ideas (i.e. interactionism). As such, reality as we know it, is taken for granted, as we rarely question the construction of reality because it appears both normal and self-evident (Best, 2005). Berger and Luckmann (1966) refer to
this acceptance of normality, i.e. the belief that “[the] reality of everyday life appears already objectified” (p. 35), as the ‘natural attitude’. Natural attitudes form through interactions and perceptions of others, which are influenced by a ‘social stock of knowledge’. This ‘stock’ is a cultural knowledge base, comprising of typfactory schemes (ibid), that enable us to classify individuals into types and to inform us on how we should deal with them. For instance, a person with a physical impairment is typified as ‘disabled’, as they are perceived to be unable to function normally, and therefore, drawing upon personal tragedy theory i.e. in need of professional support/help. Placed in this dependency role, the differential between disabled people and non-disabled people becomes habituated as a non-reciprocal relationship becomes embedded in the social fabric of society.

It would seem that society is a human product that is experienced as an objective reality, as it is formed through social interactions, which become social products. In this sense, individual biology and what we understand to be our identity are not wholly individual, but rather subjective meanings acquired through processes of socialisation (Best, 2005). In order for subjectivity to become meaningful it must be made objectively available to us and interpreted against the typifications contained within the social stock of knowledge (ibid). This would suggest that the perceived ‘disabled role’ will continue to be seen as one of dependency and personal tragedy, unless we can redefine social understandings i.e. by challenging ‘disability’ identities and hegemony.

Finkelstein (1981; 2001) eager to bring these social constructivist debates into the public arena and, indeed sociological imagination, created an imaginary tale about an upside-down disabled village. Focusing upon social relationships as the root cause of disablement, Finkelstein turns the tables making the ‘able’ ‘disabled’ and the ‘disabled’ ‘able-bodied’. He illustrates this through wheelchair-users living in a village that they have constructed according to their physiological characteristics. This only becomes a problem when some able-bodied people, through no choice of their own, move into the village. They soon struggle with the height restrictions of the doorways and lower level ceilings, often banging their heads and being left with bruises and painful backs. As a result, they become known as ‘able-bodied disabled people’, and are fitted with ‘special’ helmets and braces and are even encouraged to use wheelchairs.
Constructing a social model of disability

The social model of disability, as a political category (Goodley, 2000), emerged during the 1970s through disabled activists calling for an emancipatory alternative to the oppressive medical/individual model (Campbell and Oliver, 1996; Shakespeare and Watson, 1997; Finkelstein, 2001) and orthodoxy of thinking (Barnes and Mercer, 2003). The disability movement, as they refer to themselves (Campbell and Oliver, 1996), comprising of people with physical impairments, politically campaigned for changes to be made to common held assumptions about disability e.g. disability as a personal tragedy and disability as social deviance (Barnes and Mercer, 2003). Barnes et al (1999) draw attention to the World Health Organisation’s document ‘International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps [(ICIDH), 1980]’ to present these common held (mis)conceptions:

- **Impairment**: any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function.
- **Disability**: any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being.
- **Handicap**: a disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from an impairment or disability, that limits or prevents the fulfilment of a role (depending on age, sex, social and cultural factors) for that individual (pp. 22-23).

From this perspective, impairment focuses upon parts or systems of the body which do not work properly, and ‘disability’ centres upon what people cannot do - these being primarily basic skills of everyday life (Barnes et al, 1999; Barnes, 2009). Such views are termed as the medical model of disability; scientific understanding of the human body/existence which are thought to not function correctly. Talcott Parsons, following the work of functionalist Emile Durkheim, is believed to be one of the key thinkers of this paradigm (Barnes and Mercer, 2003; Best, 2005), viewing disability as an illness and a pathological condition. Being ascribed with this ‘sick role’ and the stigma of ‘incapacity to function normally’ meant that disabled people were subjected to invasive medical intervention, as Barnes et al (1999, p. 19) assert: “There was an expectation of improvement in the condition of those with impairments, but in practice the establishment of scientific medicine imposed new forms of social surveillance and discipline for the disabled population.” Where cures were deemed ineffective for
people they were given the label of ‘disabled’ and viewed as not quite whole, not, ‘normal’, and incapable of participating in everyday life (Barnes, 2009).

The medical model served as a sifting devise, subjecting disabled people to spatial segregation and immobilisation (Best, 2005), and in need of ‘care’ (Barnes, 2009). By the late 18-19th centuries wide-ranging institutional systems of social control were in existence, extending beyond hospitals and asylums to include prisons, workhouses, industrial schools and colonies (Barnes and Mercer, 2003 citing Cohen and Schull, 1983). Anyone perceived in a less than functioning role and unable to contribute was classed as a ‘deviant’ and “not so human after all” (Ryan and Thomas, 1980, p. 101), as they delayed/stopped work production. This brought about the ideology of ‘devalued difference’ and the negative connotations affiliated with such labels as ‘cripple’, ‘imbecile’, ‘idiot’ and ‘disabled’ (Thomas, 2004). With this ideology, medicalisation had the functional intent to control and minimise these ‘illnesses’ and to aid in the smooth running of the social system (Barnes and Mercer, 2003; Best, 2005).

However, Oliver (1996) upholds that the medical model is one significant component of what contributes to the ‘individual model of disability’. This model is underpinned by ‘personal tragedy theory’, i.e. needing a multitude of professionals and services to help an impaired person come to terms with their disabling condition and to be in a constant state of passivity and dependence (Oliver, 1990; 1996; Finkelstein, 1980). Barnes (1990) provides a clear example of this phenomenon when exploring the role of day centres in the lives of young people with physical impairments. He observed the interactions between these young people and staff assigned to support them, particularly around issues of access and user participation. Barnes found, despite some positive feedback about the helper/helped relationships and pronouncements of independence and integration that the centres were, in practice, reinforcing dependence and segregation. He concluded that the societal attitudes and social policies served to disable these young people, keeping them in a state of ‘learned helplessness’ and argues that this is not only morally reprehensive but economically disastrous, stating: “Society can no longer afford the social construction of the ‘cabbage syndrome’” (p. 203).

Barnes and Mercer (2003) argue that while the ICIDH definitions may have found favour with social scientists, they provoked considerable criticism from amongst disabled people’s organisations. Activists raised critical questions about the bio-physiological definitions of ‘normality’ and the privileges ascribed to medical, rehabilitative and educational interventions, and the neutrality of the
environment – which ignores disabling social, economic and cultural barriers (ibid; Barnes et al, 1999; Barnes, 2009). Essentially, these critical views brought about a social analysis of disability (Shakespeare and Watson, 1997; Barnes and Mercer, 2003) which inspired the ‘Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS)’ to take a pro-active political stance (Oliver, 1990; Barnes et al, 1999) and redefine disability terminology as follows:

- **Impairment**: lacking part or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organism or mechanism of the body.

- **Disability**: the disadvantage or restriction of an activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from the mainstream of social activities (UPIAS, 1976, pp. 3-4).

Often being referred to as the disability movement’s ‘big idea’, the social model enabled disabled people to challenge services provided for them and to be more actively involved in developing new ways of organising and living (Hasler, 1993); thus, becoming a self-organised movement (Shakespeare and Watson, 1997). The model holds self-empowerment at its core and is said to be a theoretical ally to the actions of disabled activists (Goodley, 2000). Being used as a political tool (Finkelstein, 2001; Oliver, 2004), it is concerned with ‘barriers’, these being both physical and attitudinal, and the power relations that sustain them (Barnes and Mercer, 2003); namely disabling social relationships (Finkelstein, 1980; 1981; 2001).

Such barriers have been argued to prevent their participation, and that by their removal, impaired individuals would no longer feel disabled or oppressed (Finkelstein, 1980; Boxall, 2002). Barnes et al, (1999, p. 27) claim “It is society [that] disables people with impairments and therefore any meaningful solution must be directed at societal change rather than individual adjustment and rehabilitation”. Further on in their thesis: “the social model’s references to ‘disabling barriers’ demands a more comprehensive examination of the processes and structures associated with social oppression and discrimination, whether at everyday levels, or in the workings of the state and social policy” (p. 31). By recognising that they are a socially oppressed minority, accountability and attention is then deflected away from their impairments, and directed instead at the socially oppressive conditions that create and sustain their disabilities. As Goodley (2000) observes, such a perspective acknowledges
that disabled people are just that, dis-abled by the contemporary social, economic, cultural and
political climate on the basis of their impairments.

Although the social model was created by the disability movement, it has not been universally
accepted and has been heavily criticised because of its reductionist/essentialist foundations. In the
following discussion I examine some of these debates.

The social model of disability: a powerful political impetus

Critiquing the social model of disability

Social model theorising has tended to dominate British disability studies to such an extent that it has
been argued that it does not fully embrace contemporary disability studies (Morris, 1991; Corker and
French, 1999), as it is not inclusive of all disabled people (Shakespeare and Watson, 2001;
Shakespeare, 2006); particularly people with learning difficulties (e.g. Chappell, 1998; Chappell et al,
2001; Boxall, 2002; 2007; Goodley, 2000; 2001; 2004). Others have argued that cultural aspects
(Shakespeare, 1994; Barnes, 1996a; 1997) and influences beyond a Western perspective have not
been taken into account (Riddell, 1996; Corker and French, 1999). Also, the social model is said to
overlook impairment (Abberley, 1987) as it ignores personal experiences of disability and impairment
(Abberley, 1987; Morris, 1991; French, 1993; Crow, 1996; Riddell, 1996; Corker and French, 1999;
Shakespeare and Watson, 2001; Shakespeare, 2006).

Before exploring the inclusion of people with learning difficulties in social model theorising, I turn my
attention to some of the other arguments raised here and present these as brief overviews.

Cultural influences:

Much has been theorised about the role culture plays in the continual oppression and emancipation
of disabled people (Barnes et al, 1999). Activists have called for social model thinking to extend
beyond purely economics-based explanations and to consider exclusionary cultural influences as well
(Shakespeare, 1994; Barnes, 1996a). Both Oliver (1990) and Barnes (1996a) argue that social
responses to impairment are the cultural products of interactions between the means of production
and central societal values. Barnes (1996a), responding to the shortcomings of Finkelstein’s (1980)
monograph\textsuperscript{2}, provides a historical account about the Western origins of disability. His thesis suggests that the mythology of bodily and intellectual perfection, or the able-bodied ideal, can be traced back to ancient Greece (who laid the foundations for Western civilisation). Conversely, Shakespeare (1994) draws upon a Feminist critique to argue that people with impairments are feared, because they represent morality, physicality and remind non-disabled people of their own vulnerability. Thus, they are identified as ‘other’, ‘objectified’ and become disabled through prejudice.

\textit{Impairment cannot be divorced from the social context in which it is experienced:}

Abberley (1987), from a materialist perspective, encourages theorists to examine the sociological origins of impairment, believing this to be socially produced rather than a fact of nature. In this sense, impairment is socially created through e.g. industrial accidents, poverty, environmental pollution, wars and medical and educational practices. Abberley believes impairment is tied to political judgements that stem from a material base; ideologies that shape social beliefs and values (e.g. capitalist mode of production). With this in mind, researchers contend that by the social model defining disability as social, there is a risk of leaving impairment as an essentialist category i.e. biologically determined (Shakespeare and Watson, 2001; Shakespeare, 2006). This embodiment analysis goes further, to suggest that there are actually no differences between disabled and non-disabled people, because everyone is impaired. Impairment, rather than being the core component of disability, as the medical model would imply, is the inherent nature of humanity i.e. we are all different. With this in mind, what then makes the minority of people, currently identified as being disabled, oppressed and marginalised by the majority?

\textit{Personal experiences of disability or impairment:}

Shakespeare (2006) argues that the distinction between impairment and disability, which lie at the heart of the social model of disability, are conceptually and empirically difficult to sustain. He states that, although the model is used as a political justification to remedy physiological and sociological arrangements, it cannot be used to resolve individual experiences of pain: “Pain itself is generated through the interplay of physiological, psychological and socio-cultural factors and thus the individual

\textsuperscript{2} Finkelstein was one of the first to draw upon a materialist framework, as he developed a three phase analysis to examine the social exclusion of people with physical impairments. However, Finkelstein (1980) states that this was not a historical analysis of disability, but rather a necessary discussion about “the context in which attitudes are formed” (p. 6).
experience can never be separated from the social context” (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 34 citing Wall, 1999). From this point of view, impairment and disability are inextricably linked e.g. a person who has Multiple Sclerosis (MS), a neurological condition, experiences pain and fatigue. These physical symptoms cannot be eliminated through altering the environment or others perceptions of them.

Morris (1991) was one of the first Feminist disabled activists to argue that social model theorising was neglecting other aspects of disability studies, i.e. culture, gender and personal identity. She advocates that personal experiences of the body should be recognised, in that impairment can create pain and difficulties. She states: “While environmental barriers and social attitudes are a crucial part of our experience of disability – and do indeed disable us – to suggest that this is all there is is to deny the personal experience of physical and intellectual restrictions, of illness, of fear of dying” (p. 10). Soon after her account, French (1993) wrote about her own experiences as a woman with a visual impairment, stating that she sometimes feels restricted due to ‘her’ impairment and that no amount of social manipulation would solve these problems. Crow (1996), being a supporter of the social model of disability, follows on from this debate, stating that impairment is an important aspect of disabled people’s lives. She explains: “impairment means our experiences of our bodies can be unpleasant or difficult. This does not mean our campaigns against disability are any less vital than those against heterosexism, sexism or racism; it does mean that for many disabled people personal struggle related to impairment will remain even when disabling barriers no longer exist” (p. 58).

As is reflected in these accounts, Tregaskis (2002) observes that, it is difficult to come to an ideological consensus based upon the assumption of a primarily and essentialist identity, as people experience impairments in different ways. Moreover, Shakespeare (2006) argues that there are ‘problems with the barrier-free utopia’ as depicted through Finkelstein’s (1981) earlier upside down village, as outside this village the wheelchair users would be disabled by the natural environment e.g. sandy beaches and rocky mountains. Although acknowledging that social arrangements can indeed mitigate some exclusions, Shakespeare contends that it is hard to blame the natural environment for these disabling circumstances. For these reasons, Shakespeare and Watson (2001) claim that the social model is an outdated ideology, as it has served its purpose; in identifying ‘some’ external causes of disadvantage. They believe that it is now time to move beyond the social model “sacred cow” (p. 5), which has gone unchallenged for too long, and to explore other theoretical perspectives.
Moving away from these philosophical critiques, I return to explore how the social model of disability is defined through emancipatory research; this being political activism.

**Emancipatory research**

Emancipation is not about disabled people blaming others, but rather calling a disabling society to account (Moore et al, 1998). The social model is driven by this imperative, or rather, transformative aim (Oliver, 1992; Priestley and Stone, 1996; Barnes, 2003; Barnes and Sheldon, 2007), which necessitates barrier removal and the promotion of disabled people’s individual and collective empowerment (Barnes, 2003). Disabled activists refer to these political actions as ‘emancipatory research’, but state that this approach is more a set of principles that are loosely defined, rather than a set of rules for doing disability research (Zarb, 1992). Oliver (1992, p. 102) explains further: “Disability research should not be seen as a set of technical, objective procedures carried out by experts but part of the struggle by disabled people to challenge the oppression they currently experience in their daily lives.” Indeed, these principles critique mainstream research production, social relations between the researcher and the researched and researcher subjectivity/self-evaluation (Zarb, 1992; Barnes and Mercer, 1997).

Disability research functions at the opposite end of the spectrum to positivistic research, where assumptions are made about truth and appropriate methods for investigating it (Oliver, 1992) and where researchers are seen as the experts; in a hierarchical position, observing and scrutinising disabled people as objects of research. Oliver adds that there are two major problems with this approach, firstly, the experience of disability becomes profoundly distorted and secondly, social change is thought to be simplistic and rational. Disability research also distances itself from interpretivist research, as this does not alter the social relations of production, as the only people benefiting from findings are researchers. Although these findings may inform policy, they have offered little in the way of immediate improvements for disabled people in their daily lives (ibid). Prior to emancipatory research, disabled people were generally suspicious of research, seeing it as a misrepresentation of their experience, irrelevant to their needs and failing to improve their material circumstances and quality of life. Emancipatory research emerged around the 1980s, as studies drew on the experiences of disabled participants to illustrate the extent of their oppression (Barnes and Mercer, 1997; Barnes, 2003), thus focusing on ‘the ‘disablism’ ingrained in the individualistic
consciousness and institutionalised practices of what is, ultimately, a disablist society” (Oliver, 1992, p. 112).

Emancipatory research is also known as critical inquiry and praxis (ibid), where the ultimate objective is to be free from the constraints of social, cultural and psychological assumptions, to become empowered to change the social context and ourselves (Merriam, 2002a). It moves beyond participation, as it centres upon the overlapping themes of reciprocity, gain, and empowerment (Oliver, 1990; 1992; Zarb, 1992). Such an approach “focuses upon the political empowerment of people through group participation in the search for and acquisition of knowledge and subsequent action to change the status quo” (Merriam, 2002a, p. 10). Such empowering principles cannot be given by a researcher, but rather the oppressed must take this for themselves (Freire, 1972; Oliver, 1990; 1992; Barton, 1998a; 1998b; Williams et al, 2005), drawing upon these processes as political platforms. Subsequently, disability research invites the researcher to place their skills and knowledge at the disposal of those being researched (Oliver, 1992). Essentially, emancipatory research is used as a tool to improve the lives of disabled people (ibid) and is inherently political; as the researcher is expected to declare from the outset ‘whose side they are on’ (Oliver, 1992; Zarb, 1992; Barnes, 1996b). They (whether disabled or not) become an ally when they join in the struggle to remove disabling barriers (Barnes, 1996b) and show their political commitment (Barton, 1998a) and expertise by making findings and analysis transparent (Zarb, 1992; Stone and Priestley, 1996). They, along with other participants, are encouraged to engage in a continual process of reflection and reflexivity (Zarb, 1992; Stone and Priestley, 1996; Barton, 1998a; 1998b; 2008; Dyson, 1998; Oliver, 2008).

With this in mind, and drawing upon previous discussions, Barton (1998a, p. 34) argues: “One of the issues facing the disability movement concerns the relationship between the individual and the collective including the transformation of the personal into political consciousness. An emphasis on difference with dignity must not lessen the importance of collective solidarity and community.” He stresses, drawing upon Stone and Priestley (1996, p. 705), that there is a need to “recognise both commonality and difference in the experience of disablement”. However, these experiences are not about disabled people understanding their impairments, but rather seeking to raise their own and others awareness about their disabled (collective) oppressive state (Oliver, 1992); and to which there is a need to tread sensitively, both around raising social awareness and the levels of expectations.
that this may bring (Stone and Priestley, 1996). I discuss these ethical implications in further detail below and in the following two chapters.

Emancipatory research has had a positive impact on many disabled peoples’ lives (Campbell and Oliver, 1996) and has enabled them to develop political avenues e.g. the journal, ‘Disability and Society’ in which to critically examine oppressive conditions. Such explorations have responded to Zarb’s (1992) calls for greater critical evaluation to develop alternative understandings about what changing relations of research production will involve. However, Barnes (1996b) has observed that some publications are geared towards academics and/or practitioners working with disabled people, rather than for disabled people themselves. Furthermore, the academic nature of these outlets precludes people with learning difficulties from being involved in this political struggle (Chappell, 1998; Goodley and Moore, 2000; Chappell et al, 2001; Boxall et al, 2004; Goodley and Van Hove, 2005). Continuing with this line of inquiry, I turn my attention to scrutinising the status and belonging of people with learning difficulties in the social model of disability and the potential to create emancipatory avenues and alliances.

People with learning difficulties and the social model of disability

Including people with learning difficulties

People with learning difficulties were not included in the in the original UPIAS definition, as the emphasis was placed on people with physical impairments (Boxall, 2007). It was only later, that discussions within the disability movement extended this definition to include people with sensory and intellectual impairments (Barnes et al, 1999). However, due to this belated inclusion, social model analysis is said to be less well developed for people with learning difficulties (Boxall, 2002). Chappell (1998) contends, metaphorically speaking, that people with learning difficulties are ‘still left out in the cold’, as they are marginalised within the movement, as it fails to represent their experiences. This is evident from the testimonies of researchers with learning difficulties working at the University of Manchester: “If you look at disability, there’s like a chart of different kinds of disability. At the top you’ve got physical impairment and sensory impairment, we come with mental health right at the bottom, so we’re like the doormat of disability.” (Docherty et al, 2005, p. 42). Additionally, another learning disabled researcher, Simone Aspis (from ‘People First’, London), critically observes:
People with learning difficulties face discrimination in the disability movement. People without learning difficulties use the medical model when dealing with us. We are always asked to talk about advocacy and our impairments as though our barriers aren’t disabling in the same way as disabled people without learning difficulties (extracted from Campbell and Oliver, 1996, p. 97).

These accounts reveal that there are many inconsistencies and, indeed, contradictions in social model theorising, as learning disabled activists are made to feel excluded, as their “difficulties’ remain tacitly conceived of as a biological deficit” (Goodley, 2001, p. 211). It would seem that the social model is not being used as a tool to explore their views, nor seeking their views to inform it (Chappell et al, 2001). Goodley and Van Hove (2005, p. 17) report that people with learning difficulties rarely lead developments in theory, practice and policy making, stating:

Their involvement in disability studies continues to be a precarious one. While a number of disabled scholars have furthered analyses of disablement and impairment, the analytical hand of people with learning difficulties is often conspicuously absent. There is a need to proactively engage with the agenda of people with learning difficulties if developments in disability studies are to be inclusive.

Of the few activists visibly campaigning, Docherty et al and Aspis state that disabled people should be united in their efforts to address oppression, arguing that barriers make them disabled as well (Docherty et al, 2005). With this in mind, it is important to recognise what external barriers are preventing learning disabled activists from utilising the social model of disability. Supporters of their inclusion believe that this may be due to the scarcity of published literature exploring learning disability experiences and the inaccessible nature of research production e.g. applying for research grants (Chappell, 1998; Goodley and Moore, 2000; Chappell et al, 2001; Boxall, 2000; Boxal et al, 2004; Goodley and Van Hove, 2005). Indeed, disability research seems to predominantly centre upon the experiences of the physically impaired and, despite challenging the production of traditional research, still seeks favour with academics. Boxall (2002) acknowledges that while learning disabled experiences are indeed underrepresented, this is not altogether surprising, given that the disabled people’s movement (mainly comprising of activists with physical impairments) places emphasis on
self-representation and self-advocacy. In a more recent critique, Boxall (2007) countering the individualising stance and calls to abandon the social model by Shakespeare (2006), asserts that the model can aid in re-evaluating deficit perceptions and that actions need to be strengthened rather than rejected i.e. people with learning difficulties need to be supported in exploring its potential.

The relevance of the social model of disability

Some supporters have questioned whether the social model is actually relevant to people with learning difficulties, as they were “tagged on as an afterthought” (Chappell et al, 2001, p. 46). Goodley (2000; 2001; 2004), building upon Abberley’s (1987) earlier theoretical arguments and Aspis’ (in Campbell and Oliver, 1996) critical comments, asserts that the disability movement needs to view ‘learning difficulties’ as a social and cultural artefact. He argues that learning difficulties present problems for the UPIAS definition of impairment, as the social model depicts impairment as opposite in character to disability; in the sense that impairment is not considered socially produced i.e. intellectual impairment is biological.

When conceptualising impairment for people with learning difficulties, Goodley proposes that there are two positions on this: The first, accepts learning difficulties as having some organic basis, but at the same time advocates that people with such impairments should not be excluded, but rather their differences celebrated. The second, critically looks at the naturalised notion of impairment, in that rather than viewing the individual through a pathological gaze, attention is turned to the context and influential structures that create and sustain such pathological curiosities. He (2000, p. 35-36) states: “while we can accept that people with learning difficulties do themselves recognise that they may be ‘impaired’ and ‘different’ [...], the social model of disability can only include people with ‘learning difficulties’ when it recognises the social origins of ‘learning difficulties’ and ‘differences’”. This would suggest that like people with physical impairments, there is a need to reflect upon the history of intellectual impairment, and particularly how epistemologies relating to biological and psychological ‘normality’ are formed. In other words, critically looking at the historical, political and socio-cultural influences which have created the notion of intellectual impairment or impairment of mind, which in turn have led to the categorisation of learning difficulties. In response, Goodley (2000; 2001) draws upon the work of Ryan and Thomas (1987) to identify three constructions that have served as diagnostic criteria.
- Low intelligence: possessing lesser practical problem-solving, verbal and social interactional abilities (Weinberg, 1989). The first two characteristics are usually accredited with more value, in terms of what is deemed as ‘general intelligence’ (‘g’). Weinberg states: “Belief in [‘g’] historically has been the primary justification for using a single index of intelligence, the IQ (intelligence quotient), for a variety of assessment purposes” (p. 99). As the concept of ‘g’, along with its measurement instrument IQ, are interwoven into the fabric of western educational ideology, I shall return to this particular discussion in the following chapter.

- Social incompetence: dependency and lacking capacity, remaining a child that never reaches adulthood i.e. personal tragedy theory.

- Maladaptive functioning: exhibiting culturally abnormal behaviours.

Goodley (2000; 2001) argues that these embodied notions of impairment should continue to be scrutinised, as they push us towards an understanding of people with learning difficulties that recognises their “resilience in the face of arbitrary, so-called scientific categorisations, which threaten to deny their humanity altogether” (2000, p. 36). He defines this capacity stance, through which people with learning difficulties are supported to self-advocate, as the ‘inclusive’ social model of disability. It is thought that such acts of self-determination can challenge deficit assumptions, placing the phenomenon of learning difficulties “in a socio-political landscape, ripe for analysis by the sociological imagination” (ibid) i.e. encouraging people to question their disabling assumptions. What then becomes equally important is not just seeking and listening to these oppressed voices, but taking notice of them as a collective voice (Campbell and Oliver, 1996). But can self-advocacy serve the dual purposes of empowering people with learning difficulties whilst also impacting upon non-disabled people’s perceptions of them? Before exploring these claims, especially how self-advocacy approaches have been employed in educational contexts to access silenced voices, I return to the transformative potential of the social model of disability.

**Practical and transformative outcomes**

**Applying the social model of disability to create change**

The social model has never claimed to be a social theory (Oliver, 1996), but rather a ‘heuristic device’ (Priestley, 1998; Barnes, 2003; Barnes and Sheldon, 2007; Barnes, 2009). Finkelstein (2001, p. 13)
explains that models are constructed to “enable us to see something which we do not understand because in the model it can be seen from different viewpoints [...] and it is this multi-dimensional replica of reality that can trigger insights which we might not otherwise develop.” Oliver (1996), adding to this, asserts models can help us better understand the world and expose social inadequacies. As such, the social model of disability can address personal experiences (as they pertain to collective oppression) and professional practices i.e. encouraging professionals to critically reflect upon their own practices, but it cannot be a substitute for social theory (ibid).

Oliver (2004) believes that the popularity of the social model has created problems, as too much time he argues is spent analysing the model (as already illustrated), rather than looking at ways in which it might be implemented. Indeed, it would seem that disability studies spends more time exploring the academic discipline (theory) of disability rather than to developing emancipatory avenues. Oliver (1996; 2004), along with others (e.g. Finkelstein, 2001; Boxal, 2002; Barnes, 2009), upholds that these contentions and confusions, are due to how the model has been defined, used and applied. More specifically, the exclusion of people with learning difficulties is argued to be due to the inaccessible outlets available in which to communicate and present expression, rather than failures in the explanatory power of the model itself (Boxall, 2002). Oliver (2004), in response to earlier critiques, defends the model by presenting the following points:

- The model is not about personal experiences of impairment, but rather the collective experience of disablement. Focusing upon the limitations of impairment is an inadequate basis for building a political movement.

- It has the potential to incorporate other social divisions (e.g. race, gender, ageing and sexuality), but critics have spent most of their time in theoretical debates, as opposed to exploring these in practice.

- Postmodernists are concerned with the cultural values of ‘otherness’, analysing the abstract of representation. Although the social model is also concerned with these issues, it places greater emphasis on the tangible contextual barriers that people face (e.g. material deprivation).

- The social model has never claimed to be a social theory of disablement, but rather a practical tool to be used.
Barnes (2009) in a similar fashion to Oliver, but specifically responding to Shakespeare and Watson’s (2001) earlier article, argues that the social model:

- Does not deny the importance, nor value of appropriate individual interventions for disabled people (e.g. medical, educational or employment interventions), but places emphasis instead on the limitations of these and the furthering of empowerment and inclusion.

- Was devised as a deliberate attempt to divert attention away from functional limitations of impaired individuals, focusing instead upon the problems caused by disabling environments, barriers and cultures.

- Is a holistic approach, which examines the totality of disabling environments and cultures (e.g. inaccessible education, information, housing, transport) and the negative connotations ascribed to people with impairments.

Returning to Goodley’s (2000; 2001) position about the social nature of intellectual impairment, Boxall (2007) draws upon Barnes (1998) to argue that no matter whether impairment is biologically, psychologically based or socially produced (i.e. perceived impairment), disability (social disadvantage and restriction) is imposed on top of people with learning difficulties’ perceived impairments. In which case, using the social model of disability as a tool (Finkelstein, 2002; Oliver, 2004; Barnes, 2009) can enable oppressed people (no matter what their oppressive circumstances) to highlight external barriers. As such, Finkelstein (2001) argues that the social model has far reaching effects, providing rich insights about the creation of society which can enable people with impairments to be seen as ‘human’ i.e. possessing a valued status. He asserts that it is more than just about accessing rights, but rather about reclaiming a history and challenging contemporary ideology (i.e. values and beliefs).

The notion of ideology is believed to underpin social (educational) policies and practices that become culturally normative (Oliver, 1990; Barnes, 1998; Priestley 1998). Priestley (1998) argues that social creationist approaches (which the social model of disability is argued to be) are useful because they “focus attention on the real and material relationships of power in disabled people’s lives” (p. 90). This encourages critical inspection into where these values come from and to ask why certain values become more dominant and whose interests would be threatened if these were to be challenged. Priestley believes that answers to these questions are more likely to be found in the examination of ideology rather than in discussions about culture, as “it is not sufficient merely to identify disablist
It would seem, despite earlier appraisal that the social model has proven to be a ground breaking critique and a powerful political impetus for disabled people (Corker and French, 1999). Barnes (2009) maintains that social model thinking has played a major role in the mobilisation of disability activism and in policy developments in the UK and across other parts of the world. Indeed, Tregaskis (2002, p. 457), elaborating upon the impact of social model analysis, states:

>This has had many positive outcomes, not least in challenging disabled people’s own internalised oppression by enabling them to make sense of their experience in a way which explains that it is not, after all, ‘their own fault’ that they face discrimination and social exclusion [...] For over 20 years, organisations of disabled people have used social model theory as the philosophical rationale for their activities. As such it has had profound practical, as well as theoretical application.

What is evident is that however the social model is conceptualised, it must stem from and feature emancipatory principles. With this in mind, I explore how it might be made more accessible for people with learning difficulties.

### Making the social model more accessible for participants/co-researchers with learning difficulties

For people with learning difficulties, their involvement and political voice are still relatively new (Boxall, 2002), making social model analysis ripe for development. However, supporters of people with learning difficulties have questioned whether the ambitions of emancipatory research can be
achieved, given that activists must initiate this for themselves and its focus on wider political outcomes rather than just direct changes to context and professional practice (Chappell, 2000; Chappell et al, 2001; Boxall et al, 2004).

Participatory research is thought to be more feasible than emancipatory research, as this allows for researchers to work alongside learning disabled activists by assisting them in empowering actions (Chappell; 2000; Goodley and Moore, 2001; Chappell et al, 2001; Boxall et al, 2004). Goodley (2000) and Chapman and McNulty (2004) refer to this as ‘bridging gaps’, where researchers can link the immediate research with the academic field. It is felt that people with learning difficulties can benefit from this assistance (Chappell, 2000; Walmsley, 2001; 2004), as researchers are advised to support people in representing their experiences and in developing their own ideas (Boxall, 2002). Consequently, Chappell et al (2001, p. 41), in their concluding remarks, assert: “It is crucial that researchers support people with learning difficulties to articulate these actions and look for innovative research practices which capture ‘doing’ as well as rhetoric”. Methods conducive to this way of working must be made accessible through the use of plain language, bullet points, symbols, photographs, illustrations and audio/video aids (Walmsley, 2001; Walmsley and Johnson, 2003).

Approaches used must reach “beyond tried and tested orthodoxies” (Barnes and Sheldon, 2007, p. 239), as Aldridge (2007, p. 3) explains:

...there is a real danger that people with learning [difficulties] will be excluded from conventional studies if methods used are not adaptable and if researchers themselves do not understand the mechanisms and approaches by which respondents with learning disabilities can be effectively included in ongoing studies.

Essentially, the choice of methods must be determined by research participants themselves (Stone and Priestley, 1996; Sheldon and Barnes, 2007). However, by attempting to strengthen these research avenues (Boxall, 2007) e.g. using more illustrations than words, this threatens the theoretical and political significance of actions by people with learning difficulties, thus limiting the potential of their research findings (Rogers, 1999; Goodley and Moore, 2000). Further to this, researchers are placed in a precarious position, as they find their careers: “obstructed if they attach greater presence to research outputs valued by disabled people than to the blueprint laid down within academic departments” (Goodley and Moore, 2000, p. 876). For example, Rogers (1999) presents
her frustrations, as she endeavoured to carry out emancipatory research, but was confronted with obstacles posed by public service agencies and by the ethics committee. She argues that they followed positivist principles, because they expected her to seek consent from prospective co-researchers with learning difficulties, through inaccessible means and by consulting with relatives and even GP’s. Indeed, it would appear that there is a paradox, as there is a need to develop accessible empowering tools that can equip people with learning difficulties to have a voice in disability studies and, more specifically, in educational contexts, but that these must also be recognised by the academic field. Despite attempts to bridge this divide, e.g. the ‘British journal of learning disabilities’ using bullet point summaries and images (usually taken from CHANGE picture bank) and Goodley and Moore’s (2000) illustrated article, this is still a problematic issue.

As these issues present challenges to emancipatory ideals (Walmsley, 2001) researchers have turned to participatory phenomenological approaches. Such endeavours focus on capturing and representing participant’s experiences of disablement (ibid), being characterised as ‘experiential issues’ (Chappell et al, 2001) e.g. the publication ‘Forgotten lives: exploring the history of learning disability’ (Atkinson et al, 1997), rather than research being used to aid in political actions. Further justifications for this alternative methodology can be said to lay in an inclusive social model philosophy (Goodley, 2000), where attempts are made to create a new social history for people with learning difficulties (Atkinson and Walmsley, 1999). Atkinson & Walmsley (1999) use the term ‘lost voices’ to describe how people with learning difficulties over the centuries have rarely been heard, or their voices represented in published literature, research and historical documents. Instead, only negative accounts have been documented, these being presented as case studies of people labelled as ‘mentally deficient’, ‘defective’ and ‘feeble minded’. Most of ‘their’ history has been dominated by others, either speaking for them or against them (Ryan and Thomas, 1987), with the assumption being that they were unable to represent themselves.

In order to retrieve these lost voices narrative style research has been employed, ranging from autobiographical approaches, oral/life history accounts to life stories (Atkinson and Walmsley, 1999; Walmsley, 2001). Other forms of autobiographical work, that have been documented include, but are not limited to, performing arts (Goodley and Moore, 2001), painting, poetry (Atkinson and Williams, 1990) and photography (Aldridge, 2007). Atkinson (2004) describes these actions as raising ‘historical awareness’, ‘giving people back their past’ and enabling participants with learning
difficulties to ‘co-construct their own history’, which in turn, is said to enhance their sense of personal identity and empowerment. The role of researchers is to elevate these lost voices by supporting participants, by becoming a facilitator, an interpreter and a scribe (Atkinson and Walmsley, 1999), so that their recorded accounts can be published and/or presented at conferences (Atkinson, 2004).

However, Walmsley and Johnson (2003) propose another way forward, which they define as an ‘inclusive research’ (see Box 2.1 Definition of Inclusive research); to reiterate the idea that people with learning difficulties are actively included, rather than what it may seem, tokenistically participating. This embraces both participatory and emancipatory approaches, fusing the different components to achieve transformative outcomes for co-researchers with learning difficulties (ibid; Walmsley, 2001; 2004). Others prefer to conceptualise this link, where research sits somewhere in-between these two avenues, as partnership research (Boxall et al, 2004). Both approaches, however ascribed, attempt to project the collective actions of the ‘self-advocacy group model’ into the academic arena, as it has been noted that activists with learning difficulties “may be ‘doing’ the social model, although not writing about it or articulating it in theoretical language” (Chappell et al, 2001, p. 41). Up until recently this was indeed the case (see Chappell, 1998; Boxall 2002), but inclusive approaches have enabled a growing body of work to emerge to raise awareness about their presence and, attempt to break cultures of silence. The following examples, which are all co-authored, have been extremely influential to this line of inquiry (in order of publication):

- Townson et al (2004) present: ‘We are all in the same boat: doing ‘people-led research”, which discusses how Carlisle People First research group work in collaboration, focusing upon a mutual interest and treating each member equally. Their partnership approach revolves around the idea that each person in the group contributes in a different way, having a different role to perform, depending upon their skills to conduct ‘person-led research’; this being started and controlled by co-researchers with learning difficulties. The researcher or advocacy support worker is to provide practical assistance. They argue that it is important to work together in every aspect of the inquiry, ensuring “everyone in the group knows what is happening and is taking part and everyone’s ideas are listened to” (p. 75).

- Docherty et al (2005) in ‘This is what we think’ discusses how a relationship was forged between co-researchers with learning difficulties and researchers at The University of
Manchester. They critically look at the place of people with learning difficulties in the disabled peoples' movement and how they might be more actively involved in social model theorising.

- Wyre Forrest Self Advocacy and Tarleton (2005) co-wrote the article: ‘Writing it ourselves’, which tells how a self-advocacy group were supported by researchers, to produce materials for young people with learning difficulties. Their book, entitled ‘Active Advocates’, was developed along with a video to help young people set up their own self-advocacy groups.

- Abell et al (2007) present their account about a collaborative project that aimed to project the voices of co-researchers with learning difficulties in the research community. This is entitled: ‘Including everyone in research: the Burton Street research group’. They recount how they started the group, reflecting upon obstacles and rewards gained from the experience. As with Townson et al (2004) they explain that co-researchers need to pick research areas that are of interest to all concerned, as research can be a lengthy process.

- Tuffrey-Wijne and Butler (2010) write about their experiences of attempting to move beyond participation to address learning disabled co-researcher involvement in the more ‘intellectual’ analytical stages of the research process (i.e. ‘Co-researching with people with learning disabilities: an experience of involvement in qualitative data analysis’). The two co-researchers observe that it is essential to take and make time to do analysis. They advise: “It is important to find ways of analysis that suit the individual research adviser. One size does not fit all” (p. 181). Further to this, they suggest that different skills be identified, allowing people to optimise their performance and analytical understanding.

- Kellet et al (2010) in ‘WeCan2: exploring the implications of young people with learning disabilities engaging in their own research’ looks at using inclusive approaches with young co-researchers (14-19 yrs). The study entailed engaging youth in decision-making forums, so they could make changes and have more choices in their lives (this being called ‘WeCan2’ project). From interview data gathered by the youth, they devised a toolkit to help people who work with other young people with learning difficulties. The researchers helped the young co-researchers orchestrate meetings and to make sense of their data analysis.

Self-advocacy whether at an individual level, or as group model, demonstrated through the above examples of inclusive research, has proven to be an effective political means at enabling activists
with learning difficulties to voice and communicate choices and has often been associated with self-determination and autonomy. It is used as a catalyst to empower, in the sense that people with learning difficulties, who wish to communicate their views, are given opportunities to speak out about their lives and campaign for their rights (Goodley, 2000). Within an educational context, Reiff (2007) states that students with learning difficulties accessing FHE may benefit from applying these skills, as they go through a variety of different transitional phases. Indeed, developing self-advocacy/co-researcher skills may maximise their educational opportunities, as they engage in reflective processes to understand themselves and their educational context (ibid). In turn, this may lead to them reconceptualising who they are, as they learn how to challenge the system (e.g. identifying disabling barriers) and to explore their own diverse learner characteristics.

**Box 2.1 Definition of Inclusive research**

- The research problem must be one that is owned (not necessarily initiated) by disabled people.
- It should further the interests of people with learning difficulties; researchers should be ‘on the side’ of people with learning difficulties.
- It should be collaborative – people with learning difficulties should be involved in the process of doing research.
- People with learning difficulties should be able to exert some control over the process and outcomes.
- The research question, process and reports must be accessible to people with learning difficulties.

(Adapted from Walmsley and Johnson, 2003)

However, the challenges and difficulties associated with a self advocacy group model/inclusive research must not be underestimated. For example, Carson and Docherty, who have been engaged in partnership research at the University of Manchester, admit that it can be a time-consuming endeavour and especially difficult when conflicting opinions arise around interpreting analysis. But,
they conclude “the outcome is a rich, detailed and certainly more complete interpretation of the data, not to mention the satisfaction gained from providing each other with such an erudite experience” (extracted from Boxall et al, 2004, p. 106). Extending this relationship further, another challenge is to do with non-disabled researchers and how they might support rather than influence participants/co-researchers with learning difficulties.

**Supportive researchers**

When analysing the role of supportive researchers in such endeavours, Walmsley (2004) states that there is often a lot of confusion about what this role entails and how they should be known, as many titles can be used e.g. supporters, helpers, research partners and inquirers (I draw upon the terms supportive researchers/co-researchers). This is also the case for researchers with learning difficulties, as they are often referred to as ‘life historians’, ‘real researchers’, ‘experts’, ‘consultants’ and ‘co-researchers’ (this being a term I have adopted). She explains that there is much confusion about what these different roles mean in practice and where the boundaries lie. The role of the skilled researcher is often hidden, as they try to divert attention away from themselves to elevate the status of their fellow co-researchers. No doubt, “underlying the researcher’s work is, almost invariably, a strong commitment to inclusion and to empowerment” (p. 67).

Rogers (1999) suggests that issues about participation and the role of researchers should be discussed at the beginning stages of the research process, and in an informal manner. However, she cautions that boundaries should be set about professionalism, so as to not mislead people and raise expectations. Redmond (2005) conversely, argues that it is difficult to set boundaries, as this makes the research seem artificial and arbitrary, and veering towards objectivity. This he feels is rather at odds with the two overlapping themes of ‘empowerment’ and ‘care’, as researchers cannot remove themselves from the process. Redmond, like Chapman and McNulty (2004), believes that their roles should be evolving, depending upon the direction of the research and levels of support needed. Essentially, helping learning disabled co-researchers maintain control, and providing them with practical back up; acting as a friend to be called upon when needed (Williams et al, 2005). To illustrate this, Chapman describes how she made information accessible and took on the role of analysing research to later discuss with the rest of the group to get their feedback (Chapman and McNulty, 2004). Williams also tells of how she, being appointed as ‘translator’, was assigned to translate academic jargon into plain English and assisted co-researchers with their vocabulary and
written skills (Williams et al, 2005). Richardson (2002) proposes that the role of researchers is to create enabling conditions, providing co-researchers with the necessary skills needed to carry out rigorous research. He suggests, like Tuffrey-Wijne and Butler (2010) that researchers should be there to assist co-researchers with their data analysis and in reporting their findings.

It would seem that the role of a researcher is a multifaceted one (Redmond, 2005), that should not be undervalued nor made invisible, as Walmsley (2004) states this deserves more than just a passing and self-effacing mention. Indeed, there is a need for clarity and transparency, as researchers’ own predispositions can act as barriers to strengthening the actions of co-researchers (Goodley, 2000; 2001; Goodley and Moore, 2000; Walmsley and Johnson, 2003; Chapman and McNulty, 2004; Walmsley, 2004; Rogers, 1999; Redmond, 2005; Williams et al, 2005). In response, Chappell (2000) advises that researchers should ask themselves, in relation to supporting co-researchers, ‘how can the integrity of their accounts be maintained’? In other words, how can they prevent themselves from assuming a dominant position? They, along with others already mentioned, encourage researchers to engage in a continuous process of reflexivity. Moreover, many are in agreement that co-researchers engaged in the research process should identify their different roles of responsibility early on and that these should be treated with equal value (Townson et al, 2004; Walmsley, 2004; Williams et al, 2005). Walmsley (2004) observes that by declaring these different positions from the start, this is more likely to resolve power sharing issues, as everyone is clear about what they have to do (Townson et al, 2004).

It would seem that equal status is equated with empowerment, but there is a need to explore this further and what this means for students with learning difficulties.

**Empowering the voices of students with learning difficulties**

Empowerment, is indeed the ‘elephant in the room’ that can no longer go ignored, as Frankham (2009) asserts that there is a need to examine what empowerment actually means. She advises that empowerment should be defined early on in the research process before any claims can be made, and requires researchers to have a sense of social understanding and responsibility about the context within which they are working (ibid). Contextual sensitivity is required, in respect to what is culturally observed, feasible and in raising the expectations of co-researchers (Stone and Priestley 1996; Rogers, 1999). With this in mind, the educational voice literature presented below has provided
much to build upon, as the voices of marginalised students, being supported by researchers, have been able to channel their views and share important insights about their disabling educational experiences.

Before exploring these examples, it is important to establish what is currently understood as voice work in disability studies, so that a clear understanding can be established. Swain and French (1998), when embarking on their own research about representing the experiences of the visually impaired through a book for adolescents, provide two helpful overlapping explanations. The first is concerned with voice as a form of decision-making, planning or evaluation, attributing this to both the power of an individual and as a collective (i.e. democratic voice). The second notion of voice is about sharing personal stories and experiences, which can uncover common threads and vast differences from these lived accounts. The following examples presented are not an exhaustive list, but they have been selected due to their relevance in an FE context. These are presented in order of publication:

Disability voice: towards an enabling education:

Leicester (1999) draws upon biographical narrative approaches to interview adult participants with learning difficulties about their educational experiences. She presents their collective accounts under relevant thematic headings, revealing shared experiences, knowledge and similarities in discriminative practices. Her research was prompted by the lack of social perspective on disability and little disability awareness in departmental practice or provision – both in relation to the education of all students and also in connection with catering for special needs. It was carried out to be of interest and to inform disabled people, their families, educational policy makers and educators. Leicester argues that there is a need to develop equal opportunities, in the same respect as for women and other members of minority ethnic groups, and to explore these developments in a society entrenched with prejudice and wide-scale discrimination against people with learning difficulties. She describes her voice study as a “forum for the expression of this shared experience of discrimination, particularly in relation to education, and to explore the implications of it for the development of a more adequate and enabling lifelong education” (p. 8).

Although aware of postmodernist distrust regarding ‘grand narratives’ and making generalisations, Leicester maintains that collective experiences can provide much insight i.e. “there is a significant epistemological difference between private experience of a single individual and experiences that
have been found to be shared by many, and that this is a crucial difference between a subjective belief and objective knowledge” (p. 14). Further on she asserts: “The merely anecdotal becomes significant when it resonates interpersonally” (p. 15). In which case, what ‘social truths’ resound from these collective student experiences? Leicester found that “many of [the] respondents felt that disabled people are labelled and devalued. They are labelled in this sense: once they are placed in the category of ‘disabled person’ this becomes the whole story – ‘their’ disability is always taken to be the most significant fact about them” (p. 10). From these findings, she argues that a learning society is what is needed, a widespread recognition and reorientation of negative attitudes to and unfair discrimination against people with learning difficulties; built upon the principles of ‘rights’, ‘respect’ and ‘resources’ (ibid).

**Student choice and participation in FE:**

Rustemier (2003) takes a critical look at ‘inclusive learning’, with a particular focus on ‘choice’ and ‘participation’ in the FE sector. She observes that the definition of inclusive learning, which guides the developments of FE policies, is problematic as the focus is on integration (placement). While these young people with learning difficulties are present on college campuses and on specialised courses, they are overlooked in terms of their contributions to college culture. Having spent time in a particular context, she reviews observational and interview data gathered from discussions with practitioners and students.

Her findings reveal that the students are involved in some decision-making processes, but these are limited, due to the inaccessible nature of methods used (i.e. questionnaires) and practitioner perceptions of limited competence. Rustemier stresses that social relations between students and tutors needs to be addressed, as this can have a detrimental effect on how these young people are included or excluded in everyday decision-making. She notes that there is a distinction between ‘speaking out’ and effecting change, as students can be asked their views, but what really matters is whether their views are leading to institutional changes and life chances. Rustemier concludes by arguing that although students are physically present, “inclusion also means to have a voice, to be able to choose what, when and where to study, and to be studying, for one’s own reasons on one’s own career/life path – all of which are questionable in the experiences of those with the ‘learning difficulties and/or disabilities’ label” (p. 150).
Martin (2009) interviewed adult participants with learning difficulties to gain insight into their experiences of FE and to explore structural oppression (i.e. educational disadvantage). With these findings, she makes recommendations for professionals. She uses a set of questions to examine these accounts, which are relayed through experiences and stories. Common themes emerge about a two-tier education system, where participants feel excluded from accessing a full range of courses available. They also experience prejudice from practitioners and other students and face a barrier of fear, as some of them expressed that they had been bullied.

Martin believes FE policy directives need to be revised, as currently students with learning difficulties are prevented from doing courses that they would like to do, due to specialist provisions (as mentioned in the previous chapter). She asserts that practitioners have a duty to challenge oppression and to enable students to have more choice: “They may or may not be able to change anything for the person they are working with, but if systems are constantly being challenged, then there is more likelihood that they will be reviewed” (p. 132). In her concluding comments, Martin states that it is not enough for professionals to be committed to the idea of inclusion, as “they must understand the barriers to it and how to begin to tackle them. In order to do this, an understanding has to be gained of the personal and structural discrimination that people will face. [They] must know the adults they are supporting or accessing well enough to work with them in providing the right type of support they need” (ibid).

Educational ‘experiential narratives’: are these really empowering?

It would seem, along with participants with learning difficulties sharing their histories, that these lost educational voices are brought into the public domain to develop more inclusive learning environments and ways of working. But, is this really the case? Are these educational ‘experiential’ accounts (Chappell et al, 2001) actually adding anything to the inclusion debate, and indeed, empowering the voices of students involved?

Atkinson (2004) maintains that autobiographical approaches enable people to gain a sense of their own identity, by claiming that “this kind of research may not change people’s lives in any material sense but it does enable them to develop historical awareness and thus to view their lives differently” (pp. 691-692). Additionally, Goodley (2000), when critically reflecting upon the empowering nature of
his own narrative research, involving self-advocates admits: “whether or not the five narrators felt empowered by their involvement in the research is a difficult question to answer. Neither were their lives changed markedly by their involvement nor were they consulted about the links made between their stories and wider issues” (p. 59).

While it would seem that a phenomenological stance, employing narrative style research (Atkinson and Walmsley, 1999; Walmsley, 2001) has brought valuable, otherwise lost, perspectives into the public domain, it has not challenged nor changed the social dynamics that preserve these disabling identities/ideologies. I would argue that the main aims and outcomes of phenomenological research are to do with authenticity and ensuring that experiences have been accurately captured (according to how people want to be represented). This seems rather far removed from the transformative aims that underlie emancipatory research and the tangible practical outcomes that must be observed (Barnes and Sheldon, 2007). I am reminded of Oliver’s (1992) assertions to focus on the “disablism” ingrained in the individualistic consciousness and institutionalised practices of what is, ultimately, a disablist society” (p. 112). Although personal experiences are part of this ‘consciousness raising’, there needs to be evidence that this has had an impact. It would seem from both Atkinson and Goodley’s commentary, that there is no way of telling whether personal accounts shared have made any difference to the individuals everyday lives, nor whether these have raised public consciousness. As Barton (2008) mentioned earlier, research must show the transformation of the personal into political consciousness. Indeed, by focusing solely on the authenticity of these individual accounts, this can detract away from the collective nature of disablement as a form of social oppression (Stone and Priestley, 1996; Barnes, 1998).

Finkelstein (2001) believes that this is a misuse of the social model, as such experiential accounts revert back to narrative case file approaches. Rather than giving activists the words to describe their experiences of inequality, he argues: “the radical social model of disability gave us the words to describe the way society is constructed so that we become disabled. It was an outside-in approach to our situation; words to describe our experiences of inequality is an inside-out approach” (p. 14). Finkelstein goes on to suggest that because western society is built upon a competitive market foundation, it is this social system that disables and forces disabled people to live in a ‘social prison’: “While no one can object to campaigning for ‘rights’ so that the prison in which we live is made more humane it is only a political buffoon who believes that exploring prisoner experiences can lead to
emancipation! Nothing less than dismantling the prison and replacing it with a non-competitive form of society can break-down the doors which bar our emancipation” (p. 15, emphasis in original text).

At present it would seem that the political potential of activists/co-researchers with learning difficulties is being diluted by, albeit, well intentioned researchers, because their involvement in radical social model research is deemed too challenging. Returning to Boxall’s (2002; 2007) insights, it is important to remember that the voices of people (and students) with learning difficulties is still relatively new in this debate, and as such, ways to use social model activism is less well developed. Just as they have a right to sit at the social model table, so do they have a right to decide what should be sociologically and educationally constructed to combat disabling. Thus, the emancipatory agenda of reciprocity, gain, and empowerment (Oliver, 1990; 1992; Zarb, 1992) apply to them also, as co-researchers with learning difficulties must be supported in achieving these ideals. In making emancipatory research more accessible to co-researchers, ‘inclusive research’, as defined by Walmsley and Johnson (2003), seems to show more empowering promise.

Being an amalgamation of both participatory and emancipatory approaches, it is still able to be driven by the following objective:

...the emancipatory disability research agenda warrants the generation and production of meaningful and accessible knowledge about the various structures – economic, political, cultural and environmental – that created and sustain the multiple deprivations encouraged by the overwhelming majority of disabled people and their families. The integrating theme running through social model thinking and emancipatory disability research is its transformative aim: namely, barrier removal and the promotion of disabled people’s individual and collective empowerment (Barnes, 2003, p. 6).

When examining this objective further, it seems that any research proposing to be empowering to co-researchers must be driven by a transformative aim i.e. meaningful change. This suggests that a researcher embarking upon empowering research would need to evaluate their own worldviews before moving any further forward (see Stone and Priestley, 1996). It would also appear that narrative research conducted on a superficial level engages in action without reflexivity, believing that
empowerment is merely happening because the person is given space in which to tell their stories/respond to questions. Such an invitation where the researcher is granting space suggests that empowerment is one sided and confined to the activity. However, empowerment cannot be given, but must be taken (Freire, 1972; Oliver, 1990; 1992; Barton, 1998a; 1998b; Williams et al, 2005), with researchers facilitating these developments (Barnes, 2003; Walmsley and Johnson, 2003).

If indeed a participant does have a sense of empowerment by relaying their personal experiences, do they continue to feel this way when the researcher transcribes and edits their narrative? Do they still feel empowered, when reading their story/responses in print (especially when not acknowledged as a co-author), but all the while experiencing disabling barriers in their everyday lives? Also, looking at this more closely, narrative engagement usually results in outcomes of an identity, i.e. humanising a person’s existence, as they contribute to a part of history, or add to inclusive educational discourse. But are these contributions really enough to impact and/or remove fundamental disabling barriers?

Not wishing to denigrate narrative style approaches, as these have indeed paved the way for many older generations of people with learning difficulties to be recognised, but how transformative are these approaches to social relations? How practical are narrative approaches to recognising educational barriers and to removing them in everyday practice (Barton, 1998a)? How responsible and relevant is this methodology to students with learning difficulties and their struggle to be heard in disabling educational environments? How informative are these accounts to practitioners who work with such young people? Do they feel better equipped to tackle external barriers? Has their own consciousness been raised to critically examine disabling epistemologies? I believe this critical analysis is long overdue, as we are still asking the same fundamental question: how might cultures and pathologies of silence, concerning students with learning difficulties in FE, be broken?

**Conclusion**

In an attempt to challenge deficit perceptions and to construct alternative understandings about students with learning difficulties, I examined the British disability movement and their ‘big idea’; the social model of disability. I discussed how this ideological framework has been used as a tool to identify external (i.e. physical and attitudinal) disabling barriers, and how this is central to political activism. The social model is defined through emancipatory research, which focuses upon transformative approaches and has enabled physically impaired people to rise up against oppression.
But, as revealed, for people with learning difficulties their involvement in these political actions are relatively new, to the extent where they have had little opportunity to develop accessible platforms in which to critically address their disabling circumstances and to express their views. From this critique, I contend that an emancipatory position, rather than a phenomenological stance exploring ‘experiential narratives’, would be of more practical use to students and practitioners in FE contexts.

In the following chapter I continue this discussion, as I examine how collaborative actions might enable students and practitioners to engage in a process of struggle. I also build upon understandings about the supportive researcher role and how this may help to bring this educational community together. In addition, I introduce another ideological framework as a possible avenue to respond to learner diversity positively.
CHAPTER 3. Building upon social model foundations: creating accessible collaborative spaces and ways to view diversity positively

In this chapter, I extend my arguments about how emancipatory principles might be applied and realised through a self advocacy group model/inclusive research. I begin this by exploring recent developments about accessing student voice through collaborative spaces, where communities of practice can be established. Thinking about how practitioners might be more actively involved in these endeavours, and indeed, processes of struggle, I turn to a commonality of purpose and propose an ‘inclusive’ cooperative inquiry. Such an approach would necessitate that all participants, both students and practitioners unite as co-researchers. I contend these actions may raise practitioner awareness and cause them to re-evaluate their practices. Being instrumental in bringing this community together I explore my own facilitatory role and how developing relationships of trust between these different co-researchers may lead to transformations. In an attempt to respond to learner diversity positively and to recognise individual contributions, I expound upon the second proposed ideological framework of multiple intelligences theory.

Creating accessible collaborative spaces

Accessing student voice through collaborative actions

Fielding (2004; 2007b) reports that there are no physical or metaphorical spaces for students and practitioners to engage in shared understanding. Indeed, many are in agreement that spaces are needed for free and open dialogue to ensue, conversations that are naturally occurring and where all participants (both students and practitioners) can feel a sense of belonging (Gibson, 2006; Shields, 2004). Fielding (2004) argues that such ‘communities of practice’ can be transformative, as they challenge what it means to be a student and, likewise, what it means to be a teacher; as all members become learners. In this sense, these dialogical encounters allow community members to co-own a process and create their own sources of legitimate knowledge. But for this to happen, there is a need for accessible, flexible and innovative approaches to dialogue (e.g. Hayes, 2004; Aldridge, 2007; Kaplan, 2008), where student views are received and responded to without recourse to their being
interrupted by professionals (Gibson, 2006). Essentially, this calls for transparency where power relationships, currently dominating educational discourse, are made visible, examined and challenged (Rose and Shevlin, 2004). At the same time this involves exploring transparency in practice, where no one person is seen as the purveyor of ultimate power, control and or decision-making, where space is made in a college timetable for students and practitioners to come together, where diversity can be genuinely celebrated and a variety of solutions to barriers explored (Barton, 1997; Gibson, 2006).

From this discussion, it is clear that continuing to access silenced voices through phenomenological narrative style research is ineffectual and at odds with a principled approach to inclusive education (i.e. increasing student participation and restructuring cultures to value diversity). Additionally, as prominent members of the disability movement point to social relations and research being instrumental to sustaining disablement (Finkelstein, 1980; Oliver, 1990; 1992; 1996; Barnes, 2003), I suggest developing a self-advocacy group model/inclusive research approach to accessing and empowering these voices will be more practical. This is coupled by the argument that the process of incorporating emancipatory principles into an educational context is yet to be fully explored (Barnes and Sheldon, 2007) i.e. an educational community working together to explore the potential of the social model of disability. But how might such an approach and, indeed, spaces be made within an educational context? At this stage, it is evident that a process needs to be collaborative, with students being acknowledged as co-researchers, and involving a variety of accessible methods. In terms of a theme, this must be controlled by and further the interests of students (Walmsley and Johnson, 2003).

Reflecting upon the FE student voice narrative examples once again (in the previous chapter), it is important to remember why these were employed in the first place. In Leicester’s (1999) own words: “It is important that policy and practice in the provision of educational services, both for people with disabilities and in terms of a disability-aware education for all, be informed by an understanding of significant aspects of the educational experiences, needs and opinions of disabled people” (p. 8). While I agree with these aspirations, accessing personal narratives about educational inequality is not enough to drive these changes. I question why does the focus have to be on ‘disabling experiences’, as it would seem students are only consulted to discuss ‘their’ understandings of ‘their’ learning difficulties and the barriers ‘they’ face. Thus the onus, or rather responsibility for inability
remains with them. I believe this position is counter-productive, as we not only stay in the deficit present, but constantly reinforce this power-imbalance and status of these students. In other words, starting from this position only serves to reinforce social constructions that these students are ‘learning disabled’, rather than challenging these views. Indeed, inclusive research could be used to expose the socio-political context and as a way of re-evaluating student status. In this sense, it is not about the disabled students’ personal experiences of education, but rather how practitioners respond to them that should be the focus of attention and where the emphasis for change should lie (Frankham, 2009 citing Lewis, 2004). However, if personal experiences about learning difficulties are not the impetus for this research, what would students be voicing?

With this in mind, I return to Swain and French’s (1998) conceptions of voice. The first notion is concerned with ‘democratic voice’, having a platform in which to have a say; this was discussed via self-advocacy and throughout the first chapter. In response to providing this platform, I have suggested exploring ‘inclusive research’. The second view is about sharing personal stories and experiences, which is said to uncover common threads and vast differences from these lived accounts. However in light of this ongoing debate, capturing the personal would need to be applicable to an educational context and, equally, far removed from the individual model of disability. But how might individual differences not as problems to be fixed, but rather as opportunities to enrich learning be voiced (Ainscow, 1999)? How might a vision of democracy through difference be realised (Barton, 1997)?

Before exploring the second ideological framework, in relation to viewing diversity positively, it is important to consider how practitioners might be actively involved in inclusive research/creating spaces.

**Cooperative inquiry and raising ‘conscientisation’**

Although the role of supportive researchers has already been discussed in the previous chapter, what about people who work closely with students with learning difficulties and who have no awareness of disability politics? Practitioners are, in most instances, encouraging of the students they support, but are unaware of pathologies of silence, and hegemony innate in their own professional practice. Tregaskis (2002; 2004) suggests that more attention needs to be given to the persistence of disabling attitudes and believes this might be addressed through forging alliances with non-disabled people.
Unlike supportive researchers, already committed to facilitating empowerment for people with learning difficulties, practitioners are yet to find their role in facilitating opportunities for students to voice. As mentioned in Chapter 1, currently practitioners are bombarded by policies and in-house strategies, placing the onus on them to drive these changes and create ways of working in partnership with students. But these attempts, coupled with employing accessible methods alone e.g. LSDA (2006) document: ‘Nothing about me, without me: involving learners with learning difficulties or disabilities’, have not broken cultures and pathologies of silence as they are not built upon emancipatory principles.

If practitioners are unable to deliver space (empowerment) for students, how might they as oppressors join in the process of struggle (Oliver, 2008)? Freire (1972) argues: “The oppressor shows solidarity with the oppressed only when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, [...] – when he stops making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love” (p. 26). This implies that practitioners need to work alongside students, and see them as a silenced minority rather than as a deficit category. Such a collaboration could be united through a ‘commonality of purpose’ (Tregaskis, 2004), a central theme to remove disabling barriers. Freire (1972, p. 37) explains that “only through comradeship with the oppressed can the converts understand their characteristic ways of living and behaving, which in diverse moments reflect the structure and domination”. Essentially, social model research can raise social awareness, allowing practitioners to reflect upon the educational context, and indeed, wider society and see lived reality through the eyes of their students. However, critical awareness is likely to happen, not through the students sharing their personal experiences of inequality, but rather through a collaborative commitment to remove disabling circumstances and the encouragement of emancipation.

In which case, such ambitions reach beyond inclusive research, pointing instead towards cooperative inquiry (Reason, 1988; Heron and Reason, 2006). This ‘inclusive’ cooperative framework involves practitioners as co-researchers as well, committed to the same theme and engaging in cycles of action and reflection to review these findings (Reason, 1999; Heron and Reason, 2006; see Box 3.1 Cooperative inquiry through four phases). As well as being co-researchers, all the participants are also co-subjects (Reason, 1998; Heron and Reason, 2006); being the authors of their own actions (Reason, 1998). Like the person-led research approach (in Townson et al, 2004) discussed in the
previous chapter, everyone takes on a different role and contributes to the process in their own way (Reason, 1998).

**Box 3.1 Cooperative inquiry through four phases**

**Phase 1**: Co-researchers come together and agree upon a central theme. They put together an ‘action plan’ as to how they will go about investigating this theme, devising an agreed set of questions and methods.

**Phase 2**: They become co-subjects, as they engage in the agreed actions; observing and recording what is unfolding.

**Phase 3**: Co-subjects are likely to be fully immersed and engaged with their action and experience.

**Phase 4**: Co-researchers re-assemble to share their findings and to consider their original ideas in light of these. As a result they may develop or reframe these ideas, or reject them to pose new questions.

The cycle of action and reflection is repeated several times.

(Reason, 1999; Heron and Reason, 2006)
Cooperative inquiry is a way of bringing people together to share common concerns and interests, as they unite for two main purposes:

- To understand and make sense of their world or social situation and to develop new creative ways of looking at this.
- Learn how to act to change things which have been identified as needing to change and to find out how to do things better.

(Reason, 1988; 1999; Heron and Reason, 2006).

Reason (1999) believes that good research is about the creative action of people to address matters that are important to them: “Cooperative inquiry is thus a form of action research that is concerned with revisioning our understanding of our world, as well as transforming practice within it” (p. 208). Fundamentally, cooperative inquiry responds to what Freire (1972) terms as ‘Conscientisation’, where co-researchers gain a raised awareness about social, political and economic contradictions and learn how to take action against these oppressive elements of reality. Indeed, to move away from educational oppression “one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 28). Reason (1998) contends that problems around ownership and power can be resolved, as the process enables co-researchers to recognise and confront these together. This would imply, that just as co-researchers engage in ‘a communal venturing forth’ (Aoki, 1984), i.e. working together on a central theme of interest, so too can they engage in ‘a communal resolution’, i.e. seeking to solve problems/issues together. These arguments appear to reiterate those presented earlier by Fielding (2004; 2007b), about creating reflective communities of practice.

Conscientisation may also enable practitioner co-researchers to take a ‘reflective turn’ (Schön, 1991a), where they critically look at the pragmatics of their educational provision. Schön (1991b) observes that practitioners tend to ‘think on their feet’, as they make quick decisions in their everyday practices, based upon their own ‘educational stock of knowledge’. They continue to draw upon these reserves, with little opportunity to pause and reflect. As they possess tacit knowledge, they often do not realise that they know more than they say (ibid) and experience ‘burn out’ (i.e. the belief that they are unable to resolve situational problems). However, Schön asserts that it takes something unexpected, i.e. ‘interruptions to thinking’ (Ainscow, 2005; Ainscow et al, 2006; Ainscow and Miles, 2010).
Taking a ‘reflective turn’ is the stage where they re-evaluate their practices and ideologies, or indeed, epistemologies influencing these actions and incorporate them into their ‘stock’. In other words, practitioners can benefit from the familiar being made unfamiliar (Delamont, 1992); where elements of practice, that have already been understood, are represented from a different perspective (e.g. the voices of students with learning difficulties). When thinking about critical reflection, in relation to employing a principled approach to inclusive education, Ainscow (2007b) advises that practitioners take an ‘inclusive turn’. This requires practitioners to not only be critically astute, but to delve deeper by examining the culture of their working environment. For example, a culture that is shaped by a belief system that pathologises learning difficulties is collectively oppressing these students and not valuing their learner diversity and contributions.

It would seem that practitioners may join in this process of struggle (Oliver, 2008) if they are also recognised as co-researchers and engaged in the same processes with their students. With this in mind, I turn to explore my own facilitatory role in bringing this community together.

**Facilitating empowering research**

Being critical of this overriding discussion, there is an assumption that students want to engage in a process of struggle (ibid), implying that they are aware of being submerged in a culture of silence. This is contradictory, as being ‘submerged’ is about being unable to see or having the social awareness that your presence and participation are ignored. Swain’s (1995) candid account about involving young people with learning difficulties in their own participatory research project demonstrates this clearly: “it became increasingly apparent that conceptions of research were constructed within the existing power relations and ideologies within the college, whatever ‘good intentions’ I had” (p. 83). This exemplifies that not only may young people be unaware of their educational oppression, but that an external researcher cannot impose their (albeit well meaning) values onto student co-researchers nor work in isolation with them, as the critical remit must extend further. Dyson (1998), also critiquing this account, raises concerns about whether these young people see themselves as having a collective identity and, as such, a collective political voice. These are all relevant points, as empowering research proposing a collaborative orientation for students with learning difficulties could be in danger of homogenising and overlooking their diverse learner characteristics.
However, the inclusive cooperative inquiry that I am suggesting not only engages everyone concerned within the immediate disabling environment, but also supports those silenced to be made aware of their disadvantage and the powerful ideologies that feed these social constructions (Reason, 1998). Stone and Priestley (1996) in their attempts to introduce more ‘vulnerability’ (i.e. researcher transparency) into research reporting, discuss whether participants, engaged in research, should be informed about the wider political nature of their oppression. They conclude that this is down to the researchers own theoretical and political standpoint. As they drew upon a social model approach, they felt they were accountable to both the disabled participants involved and to the disability movement.

Contemplating this position of external researcher declaration i.e ‘whose side are you on’ (Oliver, 1992; Zarb, 1992; Barnes 1996b; Walmsley and Johnson, 2003) and Boxall’s (2002; 2007) arguments about the belated inclusion of people with learning difficulties to social model theorising and activism, I feel I need to inform co-researchers about this political tool. I see this as my commitment to the inquiry (Reason, 1998), both as an academic and as a practitioner to share my knowledge. As Dyson (1998, p. 5-6) states: “where one ‘version’ of the truth has become hegemonic, it is the task of the researcher to seek out alternative versions which open up alternative possibilities for understanding and hence action.” However, this is not about imposing another form of surveillance from a dominant position of power (Elliott, 1991), or indeed one’s own worldviews, but rather introducing people to alternative realities and affording them the opportunity to explore these for themselves.

This implies that my role as a practitioner co-researcher, would be committed to facilitating student empowerment, whilst, simultaneously, inviting practitioner colleagues to reflect and share their professional insights (Ainscow, 2002). These actions would serve to bring students and practitioners closer together, encouraging them to collectively dismantle contextual barriers and wider educational community values (Elliott, 1991; Ainscow, 2002; Booth and Ainscow, 2002). I also understand this role to be similar in orientation to the supportive researchers in the previous chapter. Moreover, as a facilitatory co-researcher, or critical friend (Ainscow, 2002; Booth and Ainscow, 2002), it is my responsibility to introduce the inclusive cooperative approach to fellow co-researchers. However, ensuring that my own epistemologies are not distorting others expressions of activism, there is a need for full self-disclosure (Elliott, 1991; Barton, 1998a) through reflexivity (Zarb, 1992; Stone and
Priestley, 1996; Barton, 1998a; 1998b; 2008; Dyson, 1998; Oliver, 2008) and to follow the transparent examples of Chapman and McNulty (2004) and Williams et al (2005) to monitor these influences (this is explained in greater depth, including the questions I used to evaluate my position, in the following chapter).

Moving away from my researcher role, I return to my earlier discussion about how diversity might be viewed more positively, where I introduce the second ideological framework of multiple intelligences theory.

**Viewing diversity positively**

**Establishing relationships of trust through valuing diversity**

Although suggesting a possible platform in which the collective democratic voice of students with learning difficulties might be projected i.e. ‘inclusive’ cooperative inquiry, capturing their diverse voices remains an unresolved matter. Returning to the earlier arguments posed by Ainscow (1999), how might individual differences not as problems to be fixed, but rather as opportunities to enrich learning be shared? And likewise Barton (1997), how can recognising difference with dignity not lessen the importance of collective solidarity and community? There is a danger that by not recognising difference with dignity and treading sensitively around individual voice that a homogenised identity, and with it assumptions about needing common educational supports (Wright, 2006), will remain. In which case, it is essential that individual expressions not only raise conscientisation within the immediate research but also progresses learning disability activism and studies.

As I have argued, much of the voice literature to date has tended to focus upon disabling student experiences rather than disabling social relationships. This is often due to the underlying assumption that by understanding disabling experiences practitioners will see students in a new way, acknowledging these lived accounts of educational oppression and make the necessary contextual changes. However, I believe that this will keep an educational community in the deficit presence, and prevent students from liberating themselves. Despite introducing an inclusive cooperative space, in which to bring people together as equals (albeit with different roles), issues of hegemony are likely to manifest, due to the innate ‘specialist’ practitioner hierarchy. Indeed, practitioners may struggle with
the idea of students with learning difficulties being co-researchers and question the legitimacy of this new found status and, with it, their responses. It may not be enough for students and practitioners to create space and come together, as it would seem that for ‘revolutionary praxis’ (Freire, 1972) to happen co-researchers must not only engage in inclusive dialogue, but must forge relationships of trust. Freire (p. 36) argues: “[This] is the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change. A real humanist can be identified more by his trust in the people, which engages him in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favour without that trust”. In short, practitioners need to feel that they can trust the students and, likewise, students need to feel they can trust them. So how might relationships of trust be established?

Such relationships could be fostered by looking at how students with learning difficulties are perceived, as Barton (2008) notes that this is currently through a single dimension (i.e. deficit model). As such, there is a need to examine alternative social explanations and approaches to understanding intellectual impairment; a theoretical argument I touched upon in the previous chapter (i.e. through the writings of Abberley, 1987; Goodley; 2000; 2001; 2004) and to which I now return. How then might intellectual impairment be alternatively perceived, in the sense where individual learner characteristics are valued, as opposed to deficit ‘lacking something’ values? In essence, rather than facilitating opportunities for students with learning difficulties to solely recognise educational barriers and, essentially, share personal experiences of disablement (where they only serve as a barrier resource or as a ‘canary in coal mine’), I propose that students could share their personal perspectives of possibility. In which case, their voices would be sought to reclaim a valued learner identity, and thereby, cultivating an enabling space in which to progress inclusive cooperative inquiry.

This position is similar in orientation and inspired by the work of Hart (2003) and Hart et al (2004; 2007), who examine ways in which teaching practice might be free from deterministic assumptions about learner ability. Hart, along with colleagues, take a critical look at current educational practices, drawing particular attention to ability labelling and ability-focused teaching in the primary and secondary sectors. Being dismayed at the injustice and damaging effects of these courses of action, this team of researchers were eager to propose an alternative pedagogy, which would be underpinned by a more optimistic view of human educability e.g. “We needed to show how teachers can cater for diversity within their classrooms without assuming that students can legitimately be grouped into the ‘more able’, ‘average’ and ‘less able’” (Hart, 2003, p. 220). The team invited
teachers, who shared their aims and values, to engage in collaborative research that would seek their views and observe their classroom practices to formulate a distinctive and practicable pedagogy (see Figure 2.1 ‘Learning without limits’ pedagogical principles). In brief, from these teacher constructions, Hart et al found a core principle that lies at the heart of their practice, which they identify as ‘transformability’. They also found three ways in which transformability is implemented into classroom settings, these being: ‘co-agency’, ‘ethic of everyone’ and ‘trusting the learner’.

Figure 2.1 ‘Learning without limits’ pedagogical principles

From this overall enabling perspective, it seems that for learner diversity to be viewed positively, students must share insights about themselves and make valuable contributions to their educational community. But how might practitioners, not averse to these critical ideas, submerged in pathologies of silence, be helped to cultivate such a space? I propose, in conjunction with the social model of disability, that another ideological framework may assist in this analysis. I draw upon multiple intelligences (MI) theory; an ideology that reconceptualises current understandings about generalised intelligence.
MI theory: the second ideological framework

In opposition to notions about intelligence being a unitary capacity, Howard Gardner (a developmental psychologist) developed what he refers to as a ‘revolutionist theory’, known as MI theory (Gardner, 1983). He states: “I outline a new theory of human intellectual competences. This theory challenges the classical view of intelligence that most of us have absorbed explicitly (from psychology or education texts) or implicitly (by living in a culture with a strong but possibly circumscribed view of intelligence)” (p. 4; brackets in original text).

MI theory was developed and inspired (to a large degree) by sociological understandings about discriminatory educational practices, as Gardner asserts: “I am not worried about those occasional [students] who are good at everything, I’m concerned about those who don’t shine in the standardised tests, and who, therefore, tend to be written off as not having gifts of any kind” (1993, p. 11).

The theory not only advocates that there are several mental capacities, but it argues that people learn differently from one another and that everyone possesses a variety of different intelligences; their own individual mix or personal profile (Gardner, 1983;1993 and Gardner et al, 1996; see Box 3.2 The eight intelligences). Therefore, ‘intelligence’ is about how one utilises their individual skills and how they construct meanings to their environment. Gardner (1993, p. 15) defines intelligence to mean: “[The] ability to solve problems or fashion products that are of consequence in a particular culture setting or community.” This denotes that intelligence is more than just a knowledge base that one accesses, but it also about untapped potential i.e. given the opportunity, an intelligence can be exercised, like a muscle. Essentially, it is a relative concept, dependent upon both biological and environmental (cultural) factors.

Gardner et al (1996) strongly dispute the notion that IQ tests are scientific tools that can accurately predict and represent an individual’s intellectual capacities. Rather, they claim that the tests are flawed methodologically because of issues relating to validity and reliability e.g. lacking cognitive processing (measuring how answers have been achieved) and comparing different cultural groups to one another (not cross-cultural). Weinberg (1989, p. 100) reiterates this: “IQ tests are not a fair sample of a person’s entire repertoire of adaptive behaviour and are not adequate indicators of the
quality and character of human functioning […] intelligence is not limited to what intelligence tests test."

However, despite threats to validity, IQ tests have still been utilised within western societies as an important tool for selection, placement and other fundamental decision making, especially in the psycho-educational and employment sectors across the life span. Detrimentally, IQ test scores determine labels, thus those labelled as ‘educationally disabled’ and in need of specialist interventions (i.e. personal tragedy theory).

As a result, educational institutions adopting this philosophy, have only been focusing and accessing two areas of intelligence, linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences, which are both academic in nature and provide the learner with a one-dimensional view of education (Gardner, 1993). Gardner (p. 8) states that these two intelligences have been “figuratively speaking placed on a pedestal”, which he repeatedly argues is because of IQ testing:

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Box 3.2 The eight intelligences</th>
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<td><strong>The theory comprises of eight intelligences:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Linguistic</strong>: reading, writing, listening and talking.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Musical</strong>: singing, playing an instrument, conducting, composing and musical appreciation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Logical-Mathematical</strong>: numerable computation, deriving proofs, solving local puzzles and scientific thinking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Spatial (visual)</strong>: navigation and spatial awareness and visual arts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Bodily-Kinaesthetic</strong>: use of the body, sport, dance and acting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Intrapersonal</strong>: self-understanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Interpersonal</strong>: understanding others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Naturalistic</strong>: understanding the world through nature</td>
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(Gardner, 1983; 1993; Gardner et al, 1996)
I want to suggest that along with this one-dimensional view of how to access people’s minds comes a corresponding view of school, which I will call the ‘uniform view’. In the ‘uniform’ school, there is a core curriculum, a set of facts that everybody should know, and very few electives [...] In the ‘uniform’ school there are regular assessments, using paper and pencil instruments, of the IQ or SAT variety (p. 6).

Since its inception in 1983, MI theory has become both internationally renowned and caused much controversy. There is intrigue amongst educationalists, who follow Gardner’s (1993) charge about wanting to change perceptions of intelligence and to encourage developments for alternative learning environments to ultimately create more person-centred schools (where learner diversity is valued): “In my view, the purpose of school should be to develop intelligences and to help people reach vocational and avocational goals that are appropriate to their particular spectrum of intelligences. People who are helped to do so, I believe, feel more engaged and competent, and therefore more inclined to serve the society in a constructive way” (p. 9).

However, it has also sparked fierce criticism and debate; with these criticisms mainly arising from psychometricians. Indeed, MI theory clashes with this deductive reasoning (Chen, 2004), to the extent where it could be argued that they are at opposite ends of the spectrum. However, MI theory does not deny the existence of ‘g’, but rather the fallacies associated with it (i.e. IQ tests and statistical measures e.g. ‘bell curve’: symmetrical curve of a normal distribution) and the argument that it alone can accurately represent a person’s intelligence. Critics of MI theory have questioned its validity on two accounts (these being affiliated with internal and external validity). Firstly, is MI a valid representation of the human mind/brain and secondly, how effective is MI as a basis for improving educational outcomes, learning, and personal achievement? (Shearer, 2004). Klein (2003, p. 50) describes MI theory as “new psychological wine in old pedagogical bottles”; namely a theory that claims to be revolutionary, but on closer inspection lacks legitimacy. He argues that MI theory has proved popular with educationalists because it advocates diversity of learning, a principle that is already acknowledged. He remarks: “Given [the] artificially constricted choice between general intelligence theory and MI theory, it is not surprising that many educators have interpreted the diversity of students and curricula as multiplicity of intelligences” (p. 62).
However, despite “having never established a field staff to support the implementation of his ideas or evaluate their use” (Kornhaber, 2004, p. 67), Gardner and other researchers have been involved in many studies (through case studies and action research with practitioners) to assess the impact of the theory in an array of different educational contexts. Such inquiries have consisted of MI workshops, courses and curriculum (Gardner, 2004). The empirical findings presented here are not an exhaustive list or extensive accounts, but represent a few examples of MI approaches. Most of these studies were extracted from American journals, where alternative terminology is used. It is also important to point out that when referring to students with learning difficulties, these are learners described as having specific/mild learning difficulties. This was an interesting development in itself, as I found no research examples featuring students with purported moderate learning difficulties.

Kornhaber (2004), reviewing earlier research, assessed why educators were enthusiastic about MI theory and, whether once adopted, they observed any changes. Firstly, drawing upon qualitative methods, in the form of interviews and observations, she collected accounts from ninety one educators who worked in nine schools (one middle school and eight elementary schools) over a period of two years. It was concluded that the educators embraced the theory for a variety of reasons:

- MI validated what educators already knew.
- MI complemented educators’ existing philosophies and beliefs.
- Educators already used some practices that fitted with the theory.
- MI provided a framework for organising educators’ practice.
- Educators reported that MI helped extend their practice.

The second part of the study was to determine whether there were any visible changes once implemented, and (for the purposes of this review) whether students with learning difficulties actually benefited. This study drew on a sub-sample consisting of the three previous sites taken from the first investigation. These findings showed that “80% reported a range of improvements for students with learning difficulties (e.g. improved learning, improved motivation, effort or social adjustment), with all but one of the schools associating this improvement with MI” (p. 72). Furthermore, in relation to
[student diversity, “[e]ducators also commented that the theory helped support school cultures in which many different kinds of learners were valued” (ibid).]

Noble (2004), drawing upon mixed methods in the form of questionnaires, group discussions and interviews involving sixteen teachers working within two single stream elementary schools (from kindergarten to year six) over a period of eighteen months, assessed MI theory in conjunction with Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives in the cognitive domain (MI/RBT matrix). He reported that: “73% of the teachers perceived that MI theory provided them with a tool for catering for different students’ intellectual strengths or ways of learning” (p. 196). Noble concluded that: “Several teachers’ perceived particular benefits for those students who had strengths in non-academic intelligences, who were experiencing learning difficulties” (p. 205). Additionally, Hopper and Hurry (2000) set up an eight month project with seven secondary school teachers and three primary school teachers in the form of workshops and observations. MI theory was used as a framework to help teachers to aid students to access their own intelligence profiles and design lesson content. It was concluded that: “Many teachers found that enhancing children’s self concepts through MI played a significant part in the overall success of the project for them” (p. 29).

Although the majority of these examples have focused upon practitioner evaluations, Gardner (1993) states that in a person-centred educational context, the voices of students must be at the centre of the investigation, and collaborative models must be utilised to formulate and enhance their (unique) intelligences profile.

**Central theme: student learning preferences**

MI theory appears to rest on the same critical sociological arguments as the social model of disability, in so much as individual students are accepted, and places the onus on the educational context to practice inclusive principles. For this reason, Barrington (2004) argues that MI theory is an inclusive pedagogy because it takes a wide view of intelligence and works towards teaching and assessing students using more than two of the intelligences. Much of the research exploring the theory in practice has been carried out in the primary and secondary schools, but Barrington suggests that MI theory might be better served in the FHE sectors. He observes that young adults are more able to draw upon their past experiences to articulate self understanding and to recognise their intellectual strengths and weaknesses. In this sense, there is a need to explore the theory as an inclusive
andragogy, where students become ‘reflexive learners’ (Quicke, 2003). In relation to young adult students with learning difficulties this is even more pressing, as we need to understand how they see themselves as learners (ibid).

Progressing this further, student co-researchers could create alternative learner profiles about themselves, exploring their intelligences through a variety of accessible means. The central theme of ‘student learning preferences’ could direct this exploration, as this would be of interest to both student and practitioner co-researchers. Indeed, processes and findings generated could be openly discussed as a cooperative, as Freire (1972) argues: “every human being is capable of looking critically at [their] world in a dialogical encounter with others. Provided with the proper tools for such an encounter, [they] can gradually perceive [their] personal and social reality as a well as the contradictions in it, become conscious of [their] own perception of that reality, and deal critically with it” (Forward). In which case, what accessible tools might enable co-researchers and myself to engage in reflexive processes to find our critical voices?

Conclusion

Rather than developing phenomenological narrative style research to raise and empower the silenced voices of students with learning difficulties, I have argued that an ‘inclusive’ cooperative inquiry (or designated spaces) would be more practical, as this would engage both students and practitioners as co-researchers and revolve around a central theme of interest. Such a ‘communal venturing forth’ may inspire a ‘communal resolution’, where co-researchers share reflective dialogue to address contextual issues. I suggest that his may, in turn, cause interruptions to practitioner thinking, where they critically assess their own practices and educational culture. I then discussed my role as a facilitatory co-researcher/critical friend, recognising it as my responsibility to oversee cooperative proceedings and to introduce alternative ideologies and reflexivity. This was followed by thinking about how student voices might be valued and linking this to establishing relationships of trust and moving away from one-dimensional deficit views. To progress this further, I introduced the second ideological framework of MI theory, proposing that this alternative understanding may assist in viewing diversity positively, where students could reclaim an intellectual identity and be seen in a multi-dimensional way. Returning to reflexivity, I proposed that student learning preferences could be
our inquiry central theme, as co-researchers could explore a variety of accessible tools to enable students to express their views.

In pulling together discussions from this chapter, in relation to creating an inclusive educational community, and contributions from Chapters 1 and 2, the central questions that direct this inquiry are as follows:

1. How can students with learning difficulties be helped to contribute to decision making about their own learning?

2. What are the difficulties of trying to address this issue?

3. What does this suggest about the roles of practitioners, who work with such students?

4. What should be the role of a facilitator in such processes?

In the following chapter I present how this inclusive cooperative inquiry was implemented into practice. This leads me to introduce the FE college were this was conducted, the co-researchers involved and the various processes that were employed and how these were assessed.
CHAPTER 4. Attempting to challenge cultures and pathologies of silence: designing a cooperative inquiry

As proposed by the last chapter, I identified that there was a need to develop an ‘inclusive’ cooperative inquiry (dedicated spaces) in which to bring an educational community together to focus on valuing student diversity. I implied that just as the social model of disability might encourage self-advocacy and collaborative transformation, so might MI theory encourage students to reclaim their intellectual learner identity. I begin this chapter by introducing the FE college where this inquiry was carried out and elaborate upon my part-time practitioner role. This is followed by an outline of my MSc pilot study, which was conducted at the same college (albeit under a different name). As that earlier study paved the way for this inquiry, I evaluate what I learnt from these experiences and how these findings informed courses of action. This is followed by the inclusive cooperative design, how this unfolded and the different processes that were explored. I discuss how extracts are taken from my own reflective journal and that these feature throughout this thesis, to show my reflexivity.

Being an unconventional methodology, where processes as well as their responses are explored I draw upon alternative research criteria. I explain how cooperative findings are represented in co-researchers own words/expressions in order to maintain a moral commitment and trustworthiness of these accounts and how I applied case study analysis to practitioner interview data. Endeavoring to be empowering ‘inclusive’ research, I draw attention to ‘good practice guidelines’ and ‘translating principles into practice’. I also adhere to the contextual criteria of ‘utility’ (all of which are returned to in Chapter 9 when assessing the inquiry). Ethical issues, being critical to this endeavour, are addressed, looking at matters of consent, power relationships, equal stakes and confidentiality.

The context

North Western College

The inquiry was conducted at a FE college, based in and around a major city in the North West region. To respect the confidentiality of this establishment and with it my colleagues, I will use the pseudonym of North Western College (NWC). NWC is characterised by its range, flexibility and availability of courses; spanning from A’ level, vocational, apprenticeships (working closely with
employers) English as a second language and offender learning programmes. The range of students attending NWC are school leavers (16-18 yrs) and adult learners (19+); thus providing formal education and skills to both the further and higher education sectors and including international students. In the “About us” statement via their website NWC (2010) states:

The needs of the learner are the focus of [NWC], which provides excellence in learning and training for the residents of [name of city removed] and beyond. We offer an unprecedented range of courses, with clear choices and guidance for all our students. The [NWC] is based at many sites across the city [...] Each site has its own specialist, cutting edge facilities and resources within a friendly and supportive atmosphere. The college is ideally placed to offer a huge range of opportunities for students and learners of all ages.

It aims to serve and enhance the knowledge of its local and international communities, by placing the onus on reaching out in its expansive endeavour to become more inclusive and mobilise educational opportunities.

At the start of the inquiry (September 2008), the college had just undergone a major reorganisation as it had merged with another local college to become, what has been described as a “super college” (Kingston, 2007). This ‘super college’ with its vast campuses, resources and learner diversity (being approximately 80,000) is believed to be the size of a medium university with a budget of £120m (ibid). Of the many campuses mentioned, I had planned to carry out the inquiry at one of them, as a continuation of my pilot study, but for reasons that I shall expound upon in the following chapters this was moved to another campus and involved a different educational community.

Before the merger, the college reported that it had received an ‘Outstanding’ grade from Ofsted and its partnership college an overall ‘Grade 2’. Having evolved into a ‘super college’, it professes to be the best in terms of standards and awards and in the quality of its provision. It boasts awards such as the ‘Training Quality Standard’ and ‘Investors of People’ and claims, high levels of student satisfaction - stating that students identify them as the ‘best provider of education’. These views were collected from surveys, which asked NWC students to assess teaching and learning, assessment methods, enrichment programmes, course organisation, quality of support, accommodation, services
and general facilities. Despite NWC’s claims of ‘excellence’, it is important to remember that the college, like most educational institutions, is constantly striving for greater equity and inclusion and that as an educational provider ‘we’ (speaking for myself also) have a moral responsibility to critically examine our practices and how we respond to learner diversity.

My practitioner role

I began working at the college about five years ago as part of my work experience; a necessary element of my teaching practice. I initially taught basic skills on vocational courses, predominantly food, health and hygiene to school levers and adults (aged 16-40 yrs), all described to have mild/specific to moderate learning difficulties. At the end of this academic year I was asked to stay on, which I agreed to do on a part-time basis of one day a week. At the time, I taught two groups at two different campuses.

When the inquiry began, I was teaching one morning a week on the course ‘Skills for Independence’ to young adults (aged 19-25 yrs). The course focused upon practical activities, accessing the local community and developing communication and work related skills: the aim being to support students in developing greater autonomy, providing opportunities for them to ‘speak up’ and carry out tasks independently, and enabling them to make fundamental decisions about their lives as they approached the pivotal stage of transition into work. As I was only working half a day, I was also considered to be something of an outsider. Indeed, before my session began, I would be briefed by my practitioner colleagues about weekly events and asked to incorporate relevant aims to maintain a consistent curriculum. My facilitatory role, in relation to matters of reactivity and reflexivity, will be discussed further below.

Before initiating this inquiry, I was able to utilise my insider position (at the time) to carry out preliminary research. The following discussion expounds upon this MSc pilot study and the lessons learnt from this, as well as those of prior literature presented, to inform this inquiry.

Building upon preliminary research and literature

Pilot study

I conducted a four month (March – June 2007) pilot study, addressing the question: ‘How do further education students with learning difficulties, self-advocate as learners and how can an insider
facilitate this process?’ (Scott, 2007). This was carried out at the same FE college (before the merger) with the primary purpose of informing this inquiry; the aim being to understand more about inclusive FE provision through the development of practices that value diversity by acknowledging the individual learner.

As a preliminary phase, I wanted to explore the potential of inclusive research methodology, in relation to eliciting student voices and working in partnership. This was carried out with a group of four students with learning difficulties (aged 17-21 yrs). They were selected based upon my prior teaching relationships with them and their own discretion. This originally had two overlapping central themes, to understand the diverse student experience of education, and also to explore the methodological issues and rigours associated with conducting inclusive research. This exploratory process included a variety of different methods to ascertain which were most effective at enabling the four students in question to self-advocate and express how they liked to learn. In addition, I also explored my (then) insider role. As the inquiry got underway, colleagues commented that they were eager to learn from the research, as they aspired to be more inclusive in their practices. Particular issues that were pertinent were how to conduct and implement person-centred approaches and alternative (end of year) student assessments as it was felt that the questionnaire format was inaccessible and tokenistic. With this additional theme (i.e. person-centred approaches) the research design altered to include an element of collaborative inquiry (refer to Figure 4.1 Research design for pilot study).

I began this process by drawing upon an ethnographic approach, which entailed observing the students in their classrooms and analysing how they were learning. The reasons for this approach were to enable me to understand the students learning experiences and gain insight. I then fed back what I had learnt about the students to them directly in an attempt to open up a dialogue and determine whether these findings were indeed accurate. Whilst I analysed the data from one of the conversations I had with a particular student (whom I will refer to as Lewis), the inquiry then moved into a more inclusive phase, as the students controlled the methods. This phase began by the students walking around the college campus capturing pictures using a digital camera in response to a set of questions that they asked each other (a process known as ‘photo voice’). Once the pictures had been printed off and assembled into individual collections we held a discussion about their pictures, based upon the same set of questions. The intention of this discussion was to establish
whether the students felt that their visual responses were authentic representations of them. It also provided the students with additional space in which to reflect upon their pictures, allowing for further insight.

Figure 4.1 Research design for pilot study

Shortly after this, I engaged in another discussion with Lewis whose conversational data I had been analysing to get his impressions about my findings. It was decided during this validation process that both Lewis and I would extend an invitation to his two tutors to host an additional discussion. Together Lewis, his two tutors and myself examined these findings to address what provisions could be put into place to make his learning experience more enriching. The final method that the four students and I explored together was a technique I initially developed called ‘body collages’. This involved the students drawing around each other on large sheets of paper and selecting images,
representing the eight intelligences of MI theory, which they felt represented them as learners. Once sticking up their chosen images onto their body outlines, they presented their collages to the rest of the research group.

Lessons learnt from the pilot study

The findings revealed that the four student participants were not only diverse in their educational expressions when self-advocating through the different methods, but were equally diverse in their responsibilities as research partners. Although I had anticipated that views and responses to the different methods would be varied, I had undervalued how essential their roles would be in giving them a voice as well. Consequently, when we moved into the inclusive phase of the research, where the students explored photo voice followed by a discussion of their pictures, they were eager to assist one another and volunteered to interview, film and take pictures of each other whilst engaged in these different activities. These roles carried on into the body collage method, where the students were far more adept at accessing each other’s views and gaining authentic responses than I was. In fact, it was not until I reviewed some of the audio and video recordings later on that I realised that one of the students actually seemed more confident and open when asking the others questions than when carrying out the tasks herself.

By recognising that co-researcher roles were a methodological aspect that would need additional investigation, I realised that the original research design would also need to be revised. Although questioning the overall design, I felt that the methods of eliciting student responses and how these followed on from each other were actually quite effective and worth pursuing in further research. However, what seemed to be lacking from these methods were intervals for critical reflection. In other words, opportunities for the students to feed back about what they felt methodologically, worked well and, conversely, what did not work so well and give their reasons. Thus, I concluded that student opinions about processes involved were just as imperative as their participation in them, as this was likely to enable them to become active contributors rather than passive recipients.

What was also highlighted during the study was the significance of having contextual insights, namely knowledge about available resources at the college, particularly resources that students felt comfortable using and/or had prior experience with i.e. cameras and videos. Another aspect was the existing relationships that I had with my colleagues, as I was able to negotiate how much time I spent
with the students and draw upon practitioner experiences and input to enrich the research. This became even more significant when Lewis and I hosted the collaborative conversation, where my two colleagues in attendance understood the importance of the meeting and were receptive to what was being discussed. Although, perhaps, initially appeasing Lewis and myself, it became apparent, that they were eager to learn from Lewis and keen to set goals with him.

It was at this point, along with an informal discussion that I had with another colleague about the body collage method that I realised that practitioners should have a greater role in the research. I concluded that for any meaningful change to come about from what the students were advocating practitioners would need to hear feedback directly from students themselves. I felt that cooperative exchanges of this nature could reduce misunderstandings between the two parties and provide students with a platform in which to direct their own learning.

This led me to question my own facilitatory role and how I might best serve to bridge this divide. As I had not been constantly evaluating my position during the pilot study, I felt that findings were left wanting. They relied too heavily upon my own interpretations and biases resulting, ultimately, (with the exception of the collaborative conversation) in tokenism and having no real impact upon the learning environment. In moving forward, I realised that any suggestions to participants must be significant to them, as ideas, applications and knowledge should continue to evolve after I leave. In order to achieve this, each participant must feel that they have co-ownership and control of the research and that their unique contributions are being heard and put into action.

Further to this, findings must extend beyond the college and affect other communities, especially those working closely with the students. As two of the students were preparing to go into supported employment, one of the agencies affiliated with finding placements was interested to learn from the study. They wished to observe the students engaged in the body collage method, seeing this as an opportunity to inform their own understanding. Forging links of this nature with external organisations and presenting findings more generally illustrated how important aspects of inclusive research are to the development of social inclusion.
Creating a cooperative inquiry

Applying lessons learnt to the cooperative design

Drawing upon the main lessons learnt from the pilot, I went on to design the cooperative inquiry. Presented below (see Table 4.1 How lessons learnt were applied to the inquiry) are my revised concepts followed by how they were implemented into practice. However, it is important to point out that these applications are brief and will be explained in greater depth as this chapter and the following chapters unfold.

Table 4.1 How lessons learnt were applied to the inquiry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>How these were applied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Familiar surroundings and resources</td>
<td>The inquiry was carried out at the same FE college and employed similar processes and resources. Although the inquiry initially began at one campus (Overmead), it moved to another (Newton).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examine cooperative inquiry as an extension of inclusive research (emancipatory research)</td>
<td>This was explored as a reflexive process, because it involved joint contribution, ownership and reflective cycles. Similarly, as with the pilot study, the process itself was under review.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define co-researcher roles</td>
<td>Different student/practitioner co-researcher roles were established early on, according to strengths and preferences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage greater practitioner involvement</td>
<td>Practitioners were involved in the inquiry from the beginning, as they were also assigned co-researcher status. They contributed to group discussions, were encouraged to keep a journal and to implement mutually agreed goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify my role early on and ensure this is made clear to all other co-researchers</td>
<td>My intentions and biases were disclosed to co-researchers from the beginning and were constantly scrutinised. I did this by keeping a rigorous weekly reflective account, where I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
reviewed inquiry processes and my own influences.

From the start, I took on the role as facilitator trying to link co-researchers to each other and other research communities.

| Present our findings to other communities and organisations | At the end of the inquiry each student was invited to give a presentation about themselves, drawing upon the different processes explored and what, collectively, we had learnt about them. In attendance, along with fellow co-researchers, were parents, care managers, supported employment and connextions services. As a cooperative we have also presented our findings at various conferences and taught at the university and have had work published (see Appendix 1. Cooperative publications and conference presentations). |

**Initial meetings**

As the research design evolved, to incorporate the ideological frameworks of the social model of disability and MI theory and the above concepts, the original sequence of processes changed. Rather than beginning with informal observations of the students, whereby placing myself in a position of control from the outset, I held collaborative training meetings (see Table 4.2 Research training sessions). This encouraged practitioners and students to come together, where they were invited to learn about the fundamentals of research and alternative worldviews. These meetings, followed by the majority of the inquiry processes, were carried out on Thursday afternoons (as this had been agreed by cooperative members). I met this curriculum group at the start of the 2008 academic term and began working with them as co-researchers from October onwards. Before introducing cooperative members, I discuss how the initial meetings unfolded.
The first of these meetings was an introduction (2\textsuperscript{nd} October 2008), where an open invitation was extended to students and practitioners to form a cooperative. Participants were then invited to attend three follow up meetings (7\textsuperscript{th}, 16\textsuperscript{th} and 23\textsuperscript{rd} October 2008) and be part of the inquiry thereafter. Adhering to the practical guidelines of Walmsley and Johnson (2003) and the examples of Abell et al (2007), these initial meetings served to introduce the concepts of educational research, emancipatory principles and the social model of disability and MI theory. Essentially, the idea of holding these four training sessions was to prepare participants to become co-researchers and lay theoretical foundations for the cooperative inquiry.
foundations upon which to build applications. By facilitating these meetings I was attempting to bridge gaps (Goodley, 2000; Chapman and McNulty, 2004), as I saw it as my responsibility to teach these necessary skills so that we could conduct research together. Having established ourselves as a cooperative (community of practice), I introduce each of the members by presenting a brief overview about them. I then explain how the action and reflection cycles of our inquiry were carried out, before exploring the different voice processes that were implemented.

**Introducing cooperative members**

The different members are presented below, accompanied by brief explanations as to who they all are. Beginning with student co-researchers:

Shaffia Ahmed is twenty two years old and from a Pakistani Muslim family. She lives with her parents and has two older brothers, who have moved out. She did a pre-entry programme at a non-residential specialist FE college before coming to NWC.

Another female student was originally part of the cooperative, but due to personal family reasons she left the research group and college programme. Subsequently, images where she has been captured have been blacked out to conceal and protect her identity.

Frank Lee is nineteen years old and is the second oldest of seven siblings. He lives with his mother and brothers and sisters. His mother’s partner and his children, although not living in the same house, often visit the family. Frank also did a pre-entry programme from the same college Shaffia attended before coming to NWC.

Kavita Lunj is twenty years old and from an Indian Hindu family. She lives with her parents and sister, but her sister moved out shortly after we began, as she got married. Before coming to college, Kavita attended a specialist support school.

Lee Noonan is twenty five years old and lives with his mother and brother. He also has a sister who visits the family often. Lee’s brother looks after both Lee and their mother, as she has MS.

James Ward is nineteen years old and lives with his parents and younger sister. He attended a specialist college, doing a personal development programme to gain an essential skills award, before coming to NWC.
Practitioner co-researchers:

Lorraine Pugh is a full time tutor on the specialised vocational course ‘Skills for Independence’.

Tracey Burns and Claudine Willis are both support workers on this programme.

Mark Atherton is also a support worker who joined our cooperative a few weeks into the inquiry, having moved over from another campus.

Implementing the cooperative inquiry

I drew upon Reason (1998; 1999) and Heron and Reason’s (2006) model (refer to previous chapter) to suggest we explore ‘student learning preferences’ through two action and reflective cycles (see Figure 4.2 Research design for cooperative inquiry). I also put forward similar methods from the pilot study and introduced the notion of co-researcher status, and with it, different roles of responsibility. Both cycles consisted of five student methods i.e. reflective journals, body collages, portfolios, student interviews and photo voice. Practitioners and myself also completed a reflective journal and I carried out informal observations during Cycle 1.

At the end of the first cycle we engaged in reflection, reviewing our progress and discussed what we had learnt. Designated chairpersons opened up the meetings and prompted other co-researchers to carry out their responsibilities. I then presented my compiled findings and shared with everyone else what I had learnt about each student individually. This was followed by students revealing the content of their portfolios, segments from their reflective journals and their body collages. After each student discussed their personal insights, practitioners were invited to expound upon their observations, which led to an open dialogue where we all shared our thoughts. From this collected information, student strengths were highlighted, aspirations at college and work experience were discussed and aims were agreed upon for the next cycle.

Cycle 1 commenced on the 6th November 2008 and concluded on the 19th March 2009. Cycle 2 started on the 2nd April 2009 and followed the same format, but student interviews extended to all co-researchers, inviting them to share thoughts about the overall inquiry experience. This second cycle finished on the 12th June 2009, where findings and further goals agreed contributed to end of year student presentations (held on the 4th, 18th and 19th June 2009). Although anticipating that this would
complete the inquiry, I returned to the college (23rd October 2009) to interview practitioners; the reasons of which are explained in the following three chapters.

*Figure 4.2 Research design for cooperative inquiry*
The following section expounds upon how each of the processes were explored, presenting these in sequential order.

**Inquiry processes and how these were explored**

**Reflective journals**

I bought everyone their own journal (issued 6th November 2008), as I wanted to ensure that co-researchers were issued with the same A5 hardback academic journal, including myself. Although, seeming trivial, I felt that this was an important tangible representation, illustrating the fact that all contributions were of equal value. Furthermore, this was the only method in which every co-researcher was encouraged to keep a reflective account. Although we would all be invited to record our experiences about the inquiry, these separate accounts served very different purposes, to which I elaborate.

**Student journals**:

The students were asked to recollect what they liked and/or found interesting, disliked and/or found difficult whilst engaged in different learning activities. Whilst carefully thinking about tasks, in relation to things that they had learnt, made, and reflecting upon their own personal progress, were asked to write down their thoughts about these different experiences. These reflective intervals were intended to happen whenever the students felt so inclined, as the invitation to write comments in their journals ran throughout the inquiry process. In order to add to the body collages and deepen understanding about students’ intelligences, they were invited to share segments from their journals during reflective meetings.

**Practitioner journals**:

Practitioner journals intended to serve two purposes; to examine what students were doing, in relation to how they responded to lesson content, and to provide spaces for reflective impressions about their own practices. Practitioners were asked to informally observe the students, seeking to identify individual learning characteristics that could enrich current understandings. As with the student journals, these reflective intervals happened whenever practitioners felt so inclined, as the invitation to write comments in their journals ran throughout the inquiry process.
The idea of Practitioner journals came from Hall Haley’s (2004) research, where teachers were encouraged to keep weekly accounts regarding MI activities and how they felt they impacted upon their (second language) students. She writes: “Their messages included pertinent observations of class responses and individual student reactions” (p. 169). Subsequently, I was eager to explore Schön (1991b) and Ainscow’s (2007b) assertions about practitioners ‘knowing more than they use’ to uncover the potential of using instinctive researchers who have considerable insight into student learning. Ainscow (2007a) comments that a culture of collaboration may lead to the rethinking of specialist provision and the reconsideration of supportive roles, in which case it was essential that practitioners’ self-reflections were examined further. Practitioner journals were to be the means by which I could uncover their positions through analysing their critical perspectives about what they believed their supportive roles should be. I intended to invite colleagues to share segments from their journals during reflective meetings and with myself (at a later date). However, in the following chapters I explain that this method proved to be ineffectual, leading to me interviewing them after the inquiry had finished.

*My journal:*

Extracts from my own journal feature throughout the following chapters illustrating my reflections about the unfolding process and how my critical ideas developed and how these impacted upon data collection (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Displaying segments from my own ‘story telling’ was extremely pertinent to the rigour of this inquiry, as it not only traced my progressive thinking, but also the personal dilemmas I faced whilst trying to manage my inescapable position of influence. These extracts are represented in *blue italics.*

The purpose of my journal was to enable me to take my own ‘reflective turn’ (Schön, 1991a), thus encouraging me to explore my facilitatory role. This entailed critically analysing two overlapping themes: the cooperative inquiry, in relation to design and employment and my own positioning and biases.

By its nature, inclusive research required me to ‘stand with’ student co-researchers as we collectively attempted to break down barriers (Walmsley and Johnson, 2003), or at least raise awareness about self-advocacy initiatives and how these could be applied to an educational setting. In order to ‘stand with’ students, I needed to constantly assess my own epistemologies, so as not to influence and/or
deviate from the inquiry purposes. Reflexivity, in this sense, was about my recognising these personal traits and critically observing how they may have been influencing conditions rather than trying to eradicate them. Following O’Hanlon’s (2003) guidelines I kept a reflective journal throughout the research process to monitor these biases. She suggests that this: “supports the author in the search for discrepancies between their role, responsibilities, power and control, and the real and the ideal in practice” (p. 193). Subsequently, this proved to be a primary vehicle by which I could record my retrospective thoughts about each of the processes and the overall cooperative approach in action (ibid). However, I referred to my own interpretations, when observing how the students were engaging with the different techniques as well as their interactions with practitioners, rather than making value judgements from their responses.

By adopting a ‘self-reflective attitude’, my journal entries sought to raise my critical self-awareness; a process Marshall (2007, p. 335) refers to as: “inquiring through inner arcs of attention”. During which, questions, issues and developments raised simultaneously interplayed with “outer arcs of attention” (p. 336); engaging with others, in this case fellow co-researchers. By focusing on this “attentional discipline” (ibid) of interaction between myself, co-researchers and the inquiry, the journal entries served to enhance the authenticity of data collected and how this was analysed (both during and after the inquiry).

**Body collages**

Body collages invited student self-reflection and group discussion. Although influenced by person-centred reviews, a means by which people with learning difficulties can be involved creatively in decision making about their own lives through the use of graphic facilitation (e.g. Hayes, 2004), the employment of this idea was essentially my own. I began thinking about body collages when I learnt about the ‘Learning Experiences Form’ (as proposed by Herbert, 1995), where students and practitioners worked together to review intelligences, but based upon information already obtained by practitioners. I was also influenced by student profile surveys (e.g. in Armstrong, 1999 and Stefanakis, 2002), where students were presented with questions about the different intelligences and asked to evaluate themselves as learners. However, I found both these assessment instruments to be limited and at odds with a cooperative approach. As MI is an inductive theory, I found the survey method to be too deductive, with the tendency to label/pigeon hole students further (e.g. you are X type of learner etc), rather than opening the door for additional exploration. I also felt these
processes were too wordy and abstract, with no opportunity for elaboration and collaborative analysis.

Rather than placing the onus on practitioners to direct the assessment process, thus making evaluations about students based upon information already attained, body collages were directed by the students. They were actively involved throughout, from drawing around each other, stepping outside themselves, reviewing and selecting images to reflecting upon their choices. The aim of this activity was to move students from a participatory to an emancipatory position, where they lead their own intelligences assessment. Conversely, body collages were designed to be visual representations, allowing for a ‘hands on’ approach.

In preparation for this activity, I created sets of images depicting each of the eight intelligences (i.e. bodily kinaesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, naturalistic and spatial) by using ‘Focus Essential’ and ‘Board Maker’ image software. Whilst selecting these images, I was careful not to choose pictures that were too childlike, as I wanted them to be comprehensive, but also age appropriate. This activity began by students drawing around each other on large sheets of paper and placing a picture of themselves at the top (where their face would be). They decided amongst themselves how they wanted to do this, with the following people working together:

- James drew around Frank
- Shaffia drew around Lee
- Lee, with some support from Lorraine, drew around Shaffia (see Picture 4.1 Lee and Lorraine drawing around Shaffia)
- Frank, assisted by Claudine and Tracey, drew around James

They were then given the selection of images to look through and choose from (see Picture 4.2 James and Frank looking through their images); depicting the eight different intelligences and asked to stick up the images that they felt best represented them as learners. Once the students stuck up their chosen images they were invited to stand by their collages and explain their selections, elaborating upon their likes and dislikes, as well as what they found easy and more challenging.
Once they finished their reflective presentations other co-researchers were asked to comment, asking additional questions and contributing to discussion about the student presenter.

Body collages commenced during Cycle 1: 6th November 2008, 14th, 20th and was completed on the 27th. They were explored again during Cycle 2: 2nd April 2009 (being revised and discussed in Chapter 5).
Co-researcher roles

I informed the group (13th November 2008 and reviewing again on the 14th and 20th) that although I was running the training sessions and overseeing the inquiry that we needed people to perform other important roles such as chairing, filming, taking photographs, organising paperwork for cooperative meetings, taking minutes, downloading data onto the computer and editing pictures to abide by ethical codes of practice. Lorraine assisted me with explaining what these different responsibilities were likely to entail. We began by asking who would like to chair the meetings, Shaffia, Lee, Frank and Kavita all expressed an interest. But after Lorraine and I explained that it would require a lot of talking and quite a sociable personality, only Frank and Shaffia remained eager. We decided as a cooperative that they could share this role, alternating these duties each week. In agreement, we moved onto thinking about who might like to ensure we were practicing ethical research, Lorraine put forward James and I suggested Frank. But James stated that he did not want to do this, and would prefer to work on the computer. I then suggested that James might like to download data onto the computer from the camera and video; a role he enthusiastically accepted. However, James stated that he was unsure about how to do this and might need some initial help. Both Claudine and Shaffia (who had learnt how to download from Claudine) volunteered to support him with this.

Going back to the ethical role, I explained that this would involve someone to review all our pictures and black out people’s faces and ensure we were being respectful to one another. With this, Lee asked if he could perform this role as well as being in charge of the video camera. Everyone was in agreement that Lee would be the right person for this job, as he was very considerate towards others (something that was also noted during my observations). Frank offered to help Lee with his camera duties, as there would be times when Lee would need to be in front of the camera. We then moved onto talking about who would like to be in charge of organising everyone's files, journals and portfolios and ensuring work was out on the table ready for meetings. Kavita put up her hand and asked if she could do this, to which we all agreed. Lorraine volunteered herself to keep minutes, as she was already making notes about what we were discussing. Tracey offered to assist other co-researchers working on the computer, with using the camera and with reading aloud. I reiterated that my role was to forge alliances between the university and the college, and that I would help those chairing the meetings and facilitate analytical processes. However, as the inquiry progressed, Lee decided that he wanted to be in charge of the camera, capturing photographs, whilst James took
charge of the video recording. The ethical responsibility of Lee concealing co-researcher identities was abandoned, for reasons I will explain in Chapter 5. Mark, who joined our group later, assumed a similar role to Tracey, as he assisted Frank and Shaffia with their roles. In Box 4.1 I present each co-researcher along with our allocated role. We used these visual prompts when we were meeting together and presenting our findings at research conferences.

**Box 4.1 Co-researchers and our different roles of responsibility**

During the initial discussion about researcher roles (13th November 2008), I introduced the idea of student portfolios to gauge everyone’s reactions to this method and to agree upon a format that we might like to use. Shaffia and Kavita asserted that they wanted a file, where they could house all their selected work and additional pictures. Frank suggested creating a file on the computer, where pictures capturing their work and various activities could be stored. Although initially drawn to the idea of each student creating their own format, we decided against this, and went with the file option.
suggested by Shaffia and Kavita. This was due to Lorraine mentioning that using the computer might not be very accessible for everyone, and that there were not enough computers in the classroom to go round. Thinking about how students might file their selected work, I suggested using A4 art portfolios, which everyone thought was a good idea. It was agreed that Lorraine would order the portfolios, with me running another session (29th January 2009) about what to put in them.

Portfolios were similar in orientation to the journals, as students were asked to collect work that they liked and/or found interesting, disliked and/or found more challenging. Where portfolios differed was that instead of writing their comments, students collected artefacts and photographs (taken by themselves and/or others) of them engaged in different activities. To assist them in constructing their portfolios they were asked to consider carefully why they selected them. In other words, “Portfolios tell a story [...] put in anything that helps tell the story” (Herbert, 1995, p. 74 citing Paulson and Paulson, 1991). In this sense, portfolios were more than just places to house work, but were valuable collections of evidence, revealing what the students cared about and what they were excited to learn (Stefanakis, 1995).

**Informal observations**

These initial observations (conducted on 14th November through to the 10th December 2008) were to gauge ‘how the students were learning’, i.e. how they responded to lesson stimulus and how they interacted with peers and practitioners. Essentially, the aim was “to get beyond [student] opinions and self-interpretations of their attitudes and behaviors towards an evaluation of their actions in practice” (Gray, 2004, p. 238). However, this was not about me resuming control, nor making assumptions about them, but rather using such insights to gain entry into their world and allowing for further discussion during interviews.

By observing the students over several weeks I was able to generate ‘thick descriptions’ (Bryman, 2004 citing Geertz, 1973) which became ‘rich data’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This data was used to create questions and to verify my interpretations. I was reminded that researchers often check out their observations with interview questions, as a matter of protocol to determine whether they might have misunderstood what has been seen (Bryman, 2004). In my attempts to be thorough I used the comprehensive examples of Lankshear and Knobel (2004) and Maykut and Moorehouse (1994) on
how to collect field notes by creating a pro-forma; this being presented as a chronological log, where I recorded my own reflections alongside events, which I typed up soon after.

Informal interviews

The purpose of these informal interviews was to engage with the students on a more personal level. I wanted to understand how each of the students perceived themselves as learners, and how they articulated their responses in relation to the observational transcripts and questions posed. Gray (2004, p. 214 citing Arksey and Knight, 1999) states: “Interviewing is a powerful way of helping people to make explicit things that have hitherto been implicit – to articulate their tacit perceptions, feelings and understandings”. In other words, shifting the emphasis from my perspective and tentative insights to how the students themselves constructed meanings and what they wished to voice. Additionally, as my reflections from my pilot observation suggested “recording simultaneously, both the actions of Charley and Lewis […] was not substantive enough in terms of capturing them individually as learners, as on reflection of this particular transcript there was missing follow up data (e.g. Lewis asking how a word is spelt)” (Scott, 2007, p. 54). As such, there is a need to probe further and reach for information previously unattained.

Aware of my position of power, and the danger of influencing and forming my own ‘meaning making’ from student responses (Lewis, 2002; Whitehurst, 2006), I felt the students were better served to ask each other questions. I had not planned to do more training sessions, but I felt that if I expected the students to interview each other they would need to have the necessary skills, not to mention the practise (this commenced on the 22nd January 2009). I originally thought the students would take it in turns to interview each other, but having discussed this with everyone it was decided that the chair persons would lead this process. It was felt that both Frank and Shaffia were more vocal and had the confidence to interview others. I then had the responsibility of overseeing this process, ensuring that both chairs understood the initial questions I devised and how they could adapt these to suit their own interviewing style and make them more accessible for others.

As a separate issue, I was also aware that “an audio tape is selective; filter[ing] out important contextual factors, neglecting the visual and non-verbal aspects of the interview. Indeed it is frequently the non-verbal communication that gives more information than the verbal communication”. (Cohen et al, 2000, p. 281). It was for these reasons, that I supplemented audio
data with my own and interviewers’ insights. Frank, Shaffia and I held these interviews during Cycle 1: 30th January and 5th-6th February 2009 and again during Cycle 2: 14th-15th May 2009.

**Photo voice**

Photo voice is thought to be a different way of knowing and telling, which is considered to be more inclusive, as it enables all students to read the ‘text’ (Aldridge, 2007; Moss et al, 2007; Prosser and Loxley, 2007). It relies upon students’ own interpretations, rather than the added confusion and/or manipulation of others. Jurkowski (2008) asserts that it facilitates expression and enables students to review their responses (images) through photo elicitation. She states that the goals of researchers engaged in photo voice should be:

> To enable the recording of and reflecting on problems of a group or community, promote critical discussion of these problems, generate collective knowledge of the problems through discussion of the photographs, and finally to take action to change the problems by reaching out to those who influence or make policy (ibid, p. 3 citing Wang, 2005).

It was for these reasons, that students were encouraged to capture and reflect upon images (by using a digital camera) and to discuss these findings with other co-researchers. I felt I needed to “apply this method with the intent of actively engaging [students] in the research process so that they have a voice in data analysis and the presentation through such methods as a member-check focus group, during which the group members verify themes and summaries of themes as well as discuss how they want the results used” (ibid, p. 9). Although I had intended to hold informal validation sessions with the students shortly after they had captured their images, I abandoned this in favour of collaborative reflection; where everyone was present. I expound upon these reasons further in the following chapter.

Prosser and Loxley (2007) advise that photo voice activities should focus upon social environments, which I interpreted as the college campus, as this they argue is the student's ‘territorial domain’; i.e. a place where they most likely feel confident and empowered. As such, we used a ‘walk and talk’ approach, as I was influenced by the idea of engaging students in a process of self-evaluation (e.g.
Ainscow and Kaplan, 2005; Kaplan 2008). This involved asking the students a series of questions, relating to their learning environment (Cycle 1: 12-13th February 2009) and future aspirations (Cycle 2: 7th-8th May 2009). Although formulating these questions myself (see Box 4.2 Photo voice questions), I consulted with Frank about their accessibility. He, along with Lee volunteered to assist fellow students with capturing their responses in relation to these questions. I then accompanied the students as they collected their data, audio recording their comments and providing additional support.

**Box 4.2 Photo voice questions**

**Cycle 1: College as a learning environment**

- Where is your favourite place at college?
- Where do you like to learn?
- What do you enjoy learning?
- What do you dislike about college?
- What do you find difficult at college?
- What would you like to do/learn at college if you had the choice?

**Cycle 2: Future aspirations**

- What would you like to do after you leave college?
- What job would you like to do in the future?
- How can the college help you to achieve this?
- Is there anything that might stop you from achieving this goal/job?
From understanding the different processes involved in this inquiry, I discuss how these were analysed, both during the inquiry and after leaving the college for further analytical insights and understandings. I then expound upon the pertinent methodological and ethical issues that governed this exploration.

Data analysis

During and after the inquiry

Data analysis was a continuous process throughout this inquiry, as it was a fundamental component to understanding how the students perceived themselves and how practitioners understood them as learners. It was also the driving force and impetus of this cooperative endeavour, as we all contributed findings to reflective meetings and agreed upon mutual goals. All these exchanges were audio recorded, where dialogue was handled sensitively to capture responses and to maintain authenticity i.e. by applying ‘theoretical sensitivity’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Recordings were transcribed in full with minimal editing, as I felt I had a moral responsibility to sustain the very words/expressions that co-researchers used. In addition, James videoed segments from these meetings and Lee captured still frames; thus all the images presented in this thesis were captured by them. In terms of visual analysis, rather than me, or anyone else for that matter, interpreting what the students’ images conveyed, as this would be contradictory to this inclusive agenda, as methods employed must remain faithful to the presentation or illustration of experience (Aldridge, 2007); the students advocated what these represented to them.

By recognising myself as a research instrument and a bridge between co-researchers (Goodley, 2000; Chapman and McNulty, 2004), it was essential for me to continually check how my subjectivities were shaping the collection and interpretation of data (Merriam, 2002b). This also being my rationale for keeping a reflective journal, following the advice of Cohen et al (2000 p. 239 citing Hall, 1996): “Reflexivity is an integral element and epistemological basis of emancipatory action research because it takes as its premise the view of the construction of knowledge in which: (a) data are authentic and reflect the experiences of all the participants; (b) democratic relations exist between all participants in the research; the researcher’s views (which may be theory-laden) do not hold precedence over the views of participants”. This was also why cooperative meetings were so imperative, as they ensured that everyone had a say in how data was being analysed and interpreted.
(Schön, 1991a), thus serving to make co-researchers the ‘authors of their own actions’ (Reason, 1998).

As well as assessing the development of this reflective community, I also observed what processes were encouraging students’ to assert their learning preferences. I was specifically interested in indentifying processes that influenced emancipatory actions. In this sense, I gathered evidence about the impact of ideological frameworks, depicting such actions e.g. students ‘speaking up’ for themselves and ‘reclaiming their intellectual identity’. Moreover, the final interviews also provided essential findings about co-researcher experiences of being involved in the cooperative inquiry, as they expounded upon processes that they felt were accessible and those that created additional barriers, as well as lessons learnt from this overall endeavour. These central themes arose from drawing comparisons between different co-researcher responses and pulling out significant conclusions. I achieved this by creating individual category flow diagrams and creating links between these different categories (see Appendix 2: Identifying central themes from final interview data).

**After the inquiry**

Having interviewed practitioners and transcribed this data, I used case study analysis to understand ‘what was being said’ by applying direct interpretations (refer to Appendix 3: Practitioner interview analysis). I then looked for patterns in these accounts. Primarily, I wanted to apply more rigour to my interpretations, questioning my existing assertions and scrutinising my findings further. I applied ‘categorical aggregation’, looking for what Stake (1995) refers to as ‘correspondences’, where I searched for similarities and consistencies. I used thematic analysis to direct my coding, by identifying ‘what’ was being said, as opposed to ‘how’ it was being said.

By applying the principles of correspondence I formulated twenty three categories. These were created by using ‘vivo coding’ i.e. drawing upon the very words used by practitioners. I used mind mapping software to represent these as category flow diagrams (as with earlier interview data). I then created twenty three category (yellow pinpoints) representations. Diagrams were constructed based upon how the conversation flowed (direction of the arrows) and linking what I believed to be evident from what was being said. However, I constantly questioned these links, which led me to create questioning notes (blue question marks). These represented my speculative reasoning, possible explanations and outcomes, which enabled me to make greater sense of practitioner findings.
However, it is important to point out that this was not about using creative licence, but more about understanding the nature of what was being said and interpreting this sense making. Although thematic analysis allows participant responses to speak for themselves, it can be restrictive when wanting to delve further into what is not being said, but what is being implied. Drawing out further questions, I went back to the category diagrams and created additional pink categories representing ‘factors’ and green categories depicting ‘supportive roles’. By reading between the lines again I was able to pinpoint where these occurrences were happening and provide possible explanations as to why (this further analysis is presented in Chapter 7).

Methodological issues

Participatory approaches stem from action research - a methodology that has often been heavily criticised for not being ‘proper’ research (Ainscow, 2002). These criticisms are usually from a positivist paradigm, where social science is perceived as an objective reality and scrutinised as though a ‘hard science’, through the same applied rigour of measurement, prediction and repetition i.e. validity and reliability. As such, from this standpoint, any findings generated from action research are usually deemed to be too contextual, limited to the case study and too subjective, in terms of researcher biases.

In terms of validity, it has been argued that we can never be absolutely certain about the truth of any account, therefore, judgement must be given to the validity of claims (about truth) on the basis of the adequacy of evidence offered to support them (Bryman, 2004 citing Hammersley, 1992; Schön, 1991a). According to this interpretation, this inquiry would be valid or true if it represented, depicted and/or explained the phenomena that it intended to i.e. addressing research questions and following appropriate guidelines. This raises interesting questions about researcher biases influencing the process and the whole notion of qualitative research being measurable to the same degree as quantitative research to be able to make such judgments.

In addressing this first point, as a facilitator I was inescapably part of the social world that I was researching, this being an already interpreted world by students and practitioners (Cohen et al, 2000): a complex web of individual realities feeding an educational culture. As a subjective individual within this world I brought to the research my ‘own biography’ (ibid). As mentioned already, reflexivity is about recognising the ‘looking glass self’, acknowledging that I was a research instrument. Merriam
(2002b, p. 5) advises that “Rather than trying to eliminate […] biases or ‘subjectivities’, it is important to identify them and monitor them as to how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of data.”

Returning to the second point, should collaborative research be judged according to the same set of principles as, for example, experimental or survey research? In response, Aldridge (2007) critically observes that conventional scientific research methods have been accepted as more creditable than the less conventional user-led approaches. Yet these more orthodox or recognised methods are, predominantly, inappropriate, inaccessible and/or ineffective at empowering people with learning difficulties.

Nevertheless, as a qualitative study this inquiry needed to show rigour and scrutiny to ensure good practice had been carried out. Schön (1991a, p. 10) argues that without a serious effort to make clear what is meant by rigour, inquiry “becomes an open sesame to woolly-headedness, a never-never land where anything goes”. By extending the concept of validity, I made explicit my parameters by applying alternative criteria: trustworthiness and authenticity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Credibility is a component of trustworthiness and is similar to internal validity, as it stresses the need for multiple accounts of a social reality. In terms of information collected, credibility is measured according to “good practice and submitting research findings to members of the social world who were studied for confirmation that the investigation has correctly understood that social world” (Bryman, 2004, p. 275), known also as respondent validation (or for the purposes of this inquiry student validation). Triangulation, using more than one method or source of data was another useful technique to aid in the enhancement of credibility within this inquiry (Cohen et al, 2000; Bryman, 2004). Methodological triangulation (Cohen et al, 2000 citing Denzin, 1970) was a major factor, as we examined:

- A myriad of methods to collect and analyse student voice data, i.e. body collages, student reflective journals, student portfolios, interviews and photo voice. In addition to providing the students with several outlets in which to advocate their educational preferences, the cooperative meetings also enabled us to go through a systematical process of cross-checking our findings.
- Information from three different sources; students, practitioners and my own contributions.
• My position as a critical friend through my own observations, reflective accounts and applied analysis.

Triangulation ensured that the students were not only provided with a variety of meaningful ways in which to communicate, but also an array of resources to use e.g. digital camera (filming and photography), images (via Boardmaker and Focus Essential). Another element of trustworthiness that I followed was transferability, which parallels with external validity, which is concerned with depth rather than breadth. By providing thick descriptions a database can be created, whereby allowing other researchers to judge the possible transferability of findings to other milieu (Bryman, 2004). This being particularly important when thinking about the transferability of processes to other marginalised communities.

The authenticity criterion is argued to be more thought provoking, as it asks the bigger questions and places greater emphasis on the wider political impact of research and practical outcomes (ibid). Juxtaposed with the political disability agenda, I drew upon the eight ‘good practice’ and ‘translating principles into practice’ guidelines as set out by Walmsley and Johnson (2003, pp. 16 and 41-42) to reflect upon my facilitatory role and other inquiry outcomes, which I return to in Chapter 9:

1. Research must address issues which really matter to people with learning difficulties, and which ultimately leads to improved lives for them.

2. It must access and represent their views and experiences.

3. People with learning difficulties need to be treated with respect by the research community.

4. Those involved in the research should have a commitment to social change arising from it.

5. There must be a commitment to taking people’s words seriously.

6. The research should be undertaken with the aims of empowering those involved in it.

7. Research should be viewed as a holistic nature, concerned not to fragment the individual, but rather to focus on freeing their voices.

8. The research should involve self-reflection by all those taking part, especially the researcher as it pertains to their position.
A further criterion that was essential for practitioner research was what Schön (1991a) refers to as utility; being contextual, it critically questions ‘has the inquiry been useful for practitioners/the college?’ In other words, did practitioners feel outcomes assisted them to take an ‘inclusive turn’? I felt I needed to ask myself a series of questions to evaluate this further. For example, was the cooperative inquiry a useful reflective tool and/or were there any aspects that continue to be implemented? Has it aided practitioners’ understandings towards the students involved? Has the cooperative approach been a useful catalyst at bringing everyone together? Have the exploratory processes enabled students to be more open with practitioners? Do students feel listened to? Do practitioners feel better equipped to listen? Perhaps, the most pertinent question of all being what is the longevity of these changes? I also reflect upon the utility of this inquiry in Chapter 9.

**Ethical issues**

Adhering to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines (2004), all the co-researchers were informed about the inquiry and what it was estimated to entail, in terms of their roles and methods used, during preliminary meetings and were invited rather than selected to participate (to form a cooperative). In terms of formal written consent, this was not sought after, as relationships of trust had already been established and the pilot study had already been conducted on the condition (agreement) that further research would be carried out.

Bryman (2004) states that although informed consent should ideally be obtained, it is not always feasible, as the very nature of context based research is not to be too disruptive to the everyday practices where one is collecting data from. It is not always feasible for a researcher either, especially with an unstructured approach, to provide prospective participants with all the information that they might need to make an informed decision about volunteering to take part in a project. Fundamentally, as the students are considered to have ‘low literacy skills’ (BERA, 2004), I was concerned about obtaining their consent through these traditional means. I argue consent forms can be rather tokenistic, as they often fail to accessibly convey the implications of what might be involved in research. However, all the participants were informed throughout the inquiry about their right to withdraw for whatever reasons (or no reasons) they deemed necessary. I also ensured that where their consent was unable to be obtained through conventional means that their assent was secured throughout all stages of the process. I achieved this by asking co-researchers, during regular
intervals, whether they were happy to continue and whether they had any concerns and/or questions that they wished to raise before we progressed any further.

The issue that I argue that was of paramount importance to this inquiry, and which has already been discussed at length in previous chapters was ‘power relationships’. “Relationships between researcher and the researched are rarely symmetrical in terms of power; it is often the case that those with more power, information and resources research those with less” (Cohen et al, 2000, p. 142). To reiterate, I assisted in trying to bring a community together rather than trying to control it. Resuming control as a practitioner would have led to the suppression of student voices, an unauthentic representation of findings that would have deviated away from what we were collaboratively trying to explore. Incidentally, this was another reason why I deemed traditional forms of rigour as inappropriate, as elements of control, they could be misconstrued as me trying to dominate the process rather than consulting with and empowering students.

It was imperative that all co-researchers profited from this experience, both in terms of inclusive outcomes and tangible information obtained (i.e. owning their body collages, portfolios, reflective journals and other presentation materials) and not just myself with a doctoral thesis. Confidentiality necessitated that I use pseudonyms for all those involved (Cohen et al, 2000) and that faces be blacked out to conceal identities. Although I endeavored to maintain the confidentiality of co-researchers, and others captured in pictures, I was unable to guarantee their absolute anonymity, as this was a relatively small case study (Lankshear and Knoble, 2004). However, as it transpired (in the following chapter), students insisted that their identities be disclosed, as they wanted to be publicly recognised as researchers.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I present the ‘inclusive’ cooperative model that was applied and, indeed, evolved in an FE college to bring different members of an educational community together to explore student learning preferences. I explain that these courses of action were influenced by preliminary study findings and the comprehensive literature base of previous chapters. These insights allowed me to work with students and practitioners, facilitating training sessions and in encouraging them to take co-ownership of the inquiry by becoming co-researchers. Once establishing ourselves as such, I was
able to assist co-researchers with exploring different processes to elicit views and support inclusive dialogue between them, as we engaged in two cycles of action and reflection.

With an inclusive (empowering) agenda, data analysis was a continuous process enabling co-researchers, especially students, to direct proceedings and apply their own understandings. I also commented that I felt I had a moral responsibility to ensure that all these exchanges were transcribed in full with minimal editing and limited interpretation. Indeed, it was crucial that co-researchers were represented through their own words and forms of expression. However, I utilised case study analysis to scrutinise practitioner interview data, which was an essential requirement (for reasons I shall expound upon further in the following chapters). As I was overseeing this unconventional inquiry, I recognised that I needed to be reflexively vigilant, monitoring my potential position of control, biases and the overall progress of the inquiry. As such, extracts from my reflective journal (blue italics) inform this thesis and are presented as significant findings.

As it was also my role to introduce co-researchers to alternative ideologies, I discuss the impact of the social model of disability and MI theory in the proceeding chapter. These findings draw upon specific examples where I feel students utilised these frameworks to empower themselves.
CHAPTER 5. Facilitating cooperative inquiry: assessing the impact of ideological frameworks

In this chapter, I analyse my facilitatory role in relation to the responsibility I had of introducing co-researchers to alternative ways of knowing and the impact these had upon them and the learning context. For these reasons, I felt that it was imperative to assess, from my own general observations and reflective accounts, whether the proposed ideological frameworks of the social model of disability and MI theory were enabling this community to come together and encouraging students to voice their learning preferences. From the data collected, I examine how each ideological framework was received by co-researchers, by looking at the initial training sessions (where I first introduced these ideas) and analysing this conversational dialogue. I then identify specific inquiry processes and events (or themes) which were deemed significant, as they were felt to be characteristic of these ideological ways of thinking and interacting.

Implementing the social model of disability

In the following discussion I introduce the social model of disability and encourage co-researchers (especially students) to think about its implications and how they might like to draw upon this perspective. This is then followed by examples of students ‘speaking up’ (i.e. self-advocating/empowering themselves), ‘supporting each other to self-advocate’, ‘identifying educational barriers’ and ‘exerting political activism: designing and presenting a poster’.

Introducing the social model of disability

During the induction meeting (2nd October 2008), I tentatively asked the students whether they had heard of the terms ‘learning difficulties’ or ‘learning disabilities’ before, and what they understood them to mean. For example, the following conversation took place at one stage:

Frank: When, when there’s too much noise [Me: Er Hum] it’s very hard to learn and you want people to be quiet.

Me: Yeah.

Lorraine: Hum.
Me: That’s really interesting Frank, because you’ve put it through a social model perspective straight away there [Lorraine: Hum] [text taken out].

The discussion moved on to where I introduced the social model of disability:

Me: [text taken out] So the social model actually says, well why don’t [Kavita: Hum] you ask that person what they think [Lorraine, Shaffia and Frank: Hum] before you make any judgments about them. Cos I could say, about Shaffia: “She doesn’t talk that much, well, no she’s not interested in that no”. And there’s you screaming at me going, “Er, er excuse me [Shaffia laughs], are you going to ask me whether I’m interested in that?”

Shaffia: You’re right.

What was interesting about this exchange, was Frank’s assertions that ‘learning disabilities/difficulties’ were equated to a noisy environment, a consequence that was external to him rather than internal. He felt that such external influences were challenging his learning experiences, which implied that he was already critically questioning his learner status. However, other students may not have looked at the environment in this way before, as Shaffia’s reaction: “You’re right”, suggested this discussion allowed her to reflect on this for the first time. Perhaps also, her response was one of recognition, acknowledging that she had been prohibited from ‘speaking up’ before.

As the inquiry commenced, I hosted three other meetings where I introduced co-researchers to more research concepts and prepared them with the necessary skills to begin our exploratory inquiry. During meeting 4 (23rd October 2008) I reminded co-researchers about our previous discussion about the social model, and reintroduced this by explaining that it was originally devised by activists with physical impairments. I informed them that it is used as a tool to identify and address external disabling barriers; these being both physical and attitudinal. Frank then openly shared some of his experiences about disabling attitudes at college. His insights seemed to have enhanced other student understandings, as the following lively discussion ensued:

Frank: Hannah, some people, some people rush past ya [Me: Er hum] and don’t even say sorry.

Shaffia: No, tell them no!

Me: Er hum.
Shaffia: Say you, you’re a bad person…Like er, people pushing ya with the trolley yeah?

Me: Yeah.

Shaffia: They don’t say sorry not.

Me: Er hum.

Me: Do you think then that that’s your problem or is it their problem?

Shaffia: Their problem.

Lee: Their problem.

Me: Their problem?

Frank: I, I think it’s their problem.

Me: So how about then, if you’re unable to read something, say a recipe, say if I gave you a recipe [Shaffia: Yeah] and you weren’t able to read that [Kavita: No] [Shaffia: No] is that your problem or is it my problem?

Frank: Yours.

Shaffia: Your problem.

Me: My problem?

Kavita: Yeah.

Me: What should I do then? What’s that James?

James: Get some things that will help him.

Shaffia: To help them.

Lee: Yeah.

Frank: Or make it bigger.

Me: Yeah?
At moments such as this it appeared that by recognising the injustice of their disability status this spurred the students to stand up for themselves and to contest the debilitating behaviours of others. Even Lee, who was not very talkative at this point, was in agreement that disabling problems were as a result of other people’s perceptions. What was also revealing was as soon as the students’ identified that the recipe example was my deficiency, they quickly suggested ways in which this could be made more accessible, and therefore not a problem. This seemed to imply that they had grasped the social model and were keen to explore this new found thinking. In the following section I draw upon examples to illustrate how students applied these principles to demonstrate their self-determination.

‘Speaking up’ (empowerment)

Being a fundamental component of the ‘inclusive’ social model of disability, I present some of the ways in which students asserted their voices. These findings vary from how they performed their researcher roles, engaged with the methods and seized spaces in which to share their views.

I first noticed that the students were exerting their autonomy during the body collage method. This was evident in the following journal extract (taken the 6th November 2008):

As the students began to stick up their images Shaffia was quick to observe that there was no visual depicting cricket. Keen to remedy this, she (with some help from Claudine) ‘Googled’ the image she wanted. She then printed this off and stuck it up on her collage. What is interesting about this reaction is that intelligences images can never be exhaustive, but with the use of the internet they can be, as students can add whatever they want to their collection. Shaffia clearly understood that this collage was a direct reflection of her, and thus wanted to present an accurate self-analysis.

Shaffia clearly did not feel prohibited by her collection of images, as she wanted to represent herself accurately and felt that she needed to solve this limitation. It seemed she understood that the body collage was not only a visual representation of herself, but, more importantly, a means in which to express her learning preferences. Indeed, the activity was not just another class session, but rather a process that was led by student co-researchers. When it came time for them to present their collages (20th and 27th November 2008), and where researcher roles came into effect, Shaffia assumed her
chairing role. While waiting to assign who was presenting first, Lorraine and Mark engaged in a conversation. I asked Shaffia who should present first, to which she decided Lee. Whilst Lorraine and Mark continued to converse, Tracey and I joked that Shaffia should have a hammer to tap, to get their attention, to which she exclaimed:

_Silence in court please, Lorraine, silence in court please Lorraine, please...(she laughs) In court please._

*Lorraine: What do you want me to do?*

*Shaffia: Be quiet, not talk so much please.*

*Lorraine: Ok.*

Shaffia then invited Lee to stand by his collage and explain his choices (see Picture 5.1)

I thought this exchange was very significant, as Shaffia clearly understood that she was in charge of directing this session and did not appreciate practitioners talking. It may have been the first time that she was allowed to set the terms and have others listen to her. Shaffia evidently relished enforcing her own rules and ensuring that practitioner co-researchers did as they were told.

*Picture 5.1 Lee explaining his first cycle selection of images*
Shaffia’s assertiveness was also observed when Lee explained his collage. He did not speak much, but rather pointed to his images and signed what they meant (with some signing assistance from Lorraine):

*Lorraine: So, those things, are they things that you like (Lee nods).*

Shaffia: Lee?

*Lorraine: What about the things you don’t like? (Shaffia taps on the table) show us*  

Shaffia: Shhh (directed at Lorraine)

Shaffia: Lee?

Lee: Yeah?

Shaffia: What is difficult for you?

I laughed, as I was astonished at how forward Shaffia was with Lorraine, to which she apprehended me also:

*Shaffia: Stop it, what ya [Lorraine: Lee what’s difficult for you?] laughing for?*

*Lee: For me? (pointing to himself)*

*Lorraine: On your picture? Yeah, on your pic [Shaffia: Yeah]*

Lee looked at his collage

Shaffia: Lorraine, I’m talking please!

I felt this demonstrated Shaffia’s new found authority, and how she was most displeased by Lorraine trying to lead the process. Even when I interrupted her questioning with my laughter, she reminded Lorraine that she was the chair person. However, I do not believe that Lorraine was deliberately trying to dominate the questioning, but was rather used to assuming this role, due to her tutoring responsibilities. I also feel she may have been so engrossed by Lee openly sharing information about
himself that she was eager to probe further. Whatever the reasons, Shaffia evidently asserted self-
determination and may have been insistent for Lee to do also.

During this initial method, I also noted in my journal:

Lee is noticeably becoming more vocal, as he was telling me about how his brother talks a lot, but
does not listen to him. I asked him more about this, when he chose a particular image depicting
communication, to which he stated that this was difficult for him. During his presentation I asked him
again whether this was indeed the case, to which he nodded and said “yeah” (extracted from the 20th
November 2008).

There was an underlying issue immerging about his ability to assert his voice and be heard. This
became even more apparent as the cooperative inquiry unfolded, particularly during the first cycle of
student interviews (discussed further down).

As I moved on to conduct informal observations (26th November through to the 10th December 2008),
Frank, without invitation, stated that he was unhappy about his home life. Without going into too
much detail to respect the sensitive nature of this issue, he commented that he wanted more privacy
and did not like his current living arrangements. Later, while we were in a pub having lunch, he
mentioned that he wanted to move out but to somewhere not too far away from his family. This was
revealing, as Frank may have felt that he could be open about these personal issues. I started to
think that maybe cooperative spaces invited more than just student learning preferences, but created
respectful relationships, where students could be more open and honest with practitioners.

Similarly, during my final observation (11th December 2008), Lee picked up the camera without being
asked, and independently captured pictures of fellow students. I wondered whether he was eager to
continue with his assigned researcher role during regular sessions and/or keen to show others
(especially practitioners) what he was capable of doing. Lee may have felt empowered to use the
camera, questioning why practitioners were usually the only ones allowed to use it.

After I completed my observations, Frank and Shaffia invited other students to be interviewed, which
was based upon my observational findings about them all. When Frank interviewed Lee (on the 5th
February 2009), he advocated again that his mother and brother were not listening to him, and that
this aggrieved him. Eager to unravel this further, Frank and I asked Lee whether he had difficulty
physically communicating or whether he chose not to communicate because others were speaking for him. Lee confirmed the latter. Frank also verified that he and Lee would often talk to each other in the taxi on the way home from college. I only realised the impact of this revelation when speaking with Lorraine later that afternoon, as I reflected in my journal:

*Lorraine commented to me that she noticed a change in Lee when he returned to the classroom after the interview, stating that he seemed a lot happier and clearer in his speech. Lee may have felt liberated from finally being able to get this off his chest!*

Although unrelated to his learning preferences, Lee was keen to use this opportunity to express his frustrations. Perhaps he was initially hesitant to speak, fearful that this was yet another tokenistic gesture that would be monopolised by powerful others. But he, like Frank, may have felt that he could assert himself, knowing that people were genuinely interested and attentive to what he had to say. Lee’s self determination became more evident during the proceeding photo voice task (12-13\textsuperscript{th} February 2009), when I invited him to assist fellow students with using the camera, in relation to capturing their pictorial responses. I noticed that not only did Lee rise to this challenge, but he also recorded us carrying out the method as well. I only discovered this when I was categorising the student’s pictures, and found Lee’s additional images. These in action pictures are presented below (see Pictures 5.2 and 5.3). It occurred to me that Lee may have felt he had co-ownership of this process and that these additional pictures of the ‘walk and talk’ approach would add to the richness of the experience.

The final example I draw upon, was taken from a practitioner observation. Tracey was asked by Frank and Shaffia, near to the end of the inquiry process (14-15\textsuperscript{th} May 2009): *what have you learnt about us (students) collectively and individually?*

*I think you’re speaking out more as a group now, as you didn’t before. You come together better as a group haven’t ya? You’re all talking better. And individually, probably seen more of a change in Kavita than anybody, because I think Kavita has got more confidence, since we’ve been doing this and talking more. She just took the disc off Lee in there (in reference to the classroom) and said “I’ll do it”, she wouldn’t have done that before.*
Evidently, Tracey felt that the students were ‘speaking up’ more, claiming that they were “talking better”. However, I question whether they were indeed ‘talking better’ or whether this was more to do with practitioners listening and engaging with what they were advocating. Perhaps, students were ‘talking better’, as they had learnt how to seize the space and assert themselves. What is also interesting from Tracey’s observations was how she drew particular attention to Kavita, claiming that she had gained more self-confidence. These particular insights become even more pertinent as the chapter findings unfold.

As well as maximising opportunities to ‘speak up’ for themselves individually, it was also evident that they were employing a ‘self advocacy group model’ and encouraging each other to do the same.

*Picture 5.2 Frank, Kavita and me heading over to the kitchen*
Student co-researchers supporting each other to self-advocate

In this section, I illustrate how the students supported one another in raising their voices. These findings were observed whilst we carried out the body collage and photo voice tasks.

During the first cycle, when it came time for Shaffia to present her body collage (20th November 2008; see Picture 5.4), she seemed to race through her selection of images:

Shaffia: I do like cooking (although there was no image presented of this), I like flowers, I like music and I like ducks, anything. I like erm, dancing. I don’t like erm, writing. I don’t like puzzles.

Lorraine: writing and puzzles?

Shaffia: Yeah.

Frank: Shaffia, ya need to get a few more images of what ya like, because I don’t think there’s a lot up there.
Frank’s valuable contributions led us to ask Shaffia additional questions as to why she chose so few images. From this line of questioning, cooperative members felt that perhaps Shaffia was still getting to know herself. Although she was adamant about having the cricket visual (mentioned earlier), she struggled to elaborate upon her other choices. In response to our assumptions, Shaffia stated that her mother and father did quite a lot for her and that she had not really been given the opportunity to explore things for herself. It seemed that Frank was encouraging Shaffia to show more visuals, so that a more comprehensive picture of her could be established. Perhaps he was also reassuring her that she was in a supportive environment, where she could openly share these personal insights.

Frank also showed this same level of encouragement when Kavita presented her collage a few weeks later (27th November 2008; see Picture 5.5):

Frank: Kavita, what do the pictures mean?

Kavita: That’s a lady.

Frank: Hum.

Lorraine: What does the lady mean, what’s she doing?
Kavita: She’s got a mic, she’s got a mic next to her.

She points to other images

Frank: Kavita, does that mean you like singing?

Kavita: Yeah...I like singing.

It was evident that Frank was trying to assist Kavita, by asking her more probing questions, to get her to think carefully about her choices. These questions seemed to guide Kavita through her presentation. This may have been quite challenging for Kavita, as the students created their body collages several weeks before, requiring her to reflect back to that time. As such, this supportive questioning allowed her to self-advocate freely. In light of some of these time delayed difficulties, the method was adapted slightly for the following cycle to make it more reflectively accessible. This modification, along with its implementation is discussed in detail in the MI section.

This collaborative encouragement continued into the photo voice activity (13th February 2008), where Kavita responded to the following two questions (see Pictures 5.6 and 5.7):
Where do you like to learn?

Kavita: In the classroom, sometimes.

Frank: How about the library?

Concerned that Frank’s suggestion may have influenced her own decision making, I asked Kavita the question again. She stated that both the classroom and the library were places where she liked and felt comfortable being. It was at this point that I understood, that Frank may have drawn upon his own observations and/or prior conversations with Kavita and was providing her with useful suggestions. His further questioning, rather than influencing her own decision making may have empowered her more, as it was later revealed (during Cycle 2) that Kavita very much enjoyed doing her work experience in the library.
In response to the second question, *what do you find difficult at college?*

Kavita explained that another student would sometimes be a bit too aggressive with her and was keen to take a picture of this particular student. I reminded her about the ethics training we did and how this might cause offence and be inappropriate. Thinking about how Kavita might represent this ‘difficulty’ alternatively, Frank and Lee advised her to stand up for herself, with Frank suggesting that we take a picture of Kavita instead:

*Me*: What do you think? Kavita, take a picture of you?

*Kavita*: Yeah

*Me*: Doing what Frank?

*Frank*: Like, like. If [name removed] really got on ya nerves [Me: Er hum] [Kavita: Yeah] you could tell them. Tell [name removed] [Me: Er hum] to stop.

*Me*: Oh you mean to sort of stand [Kavita: Yeah], to stand your ground.

*Frank*: How to stand up for ya self.

*Picture 5.7 Kavita: standing up for herself*
Me: Ok, so what do you think of that Kavita?

Kavita: Yeah.

Me: What would you like to do then?

Kavita: Stand up.

Me: Stand up? So how could we take a picture of that?

Frank: Hannah, Hannah, I could take a picture of Kavita standing near the wall or...

Kavita: Yeah.

Lee suggested an area by the wall and pointed to this.

Frank and Lee made the arrangements to capture this picture, which Kavita showed folding her arms to represent her ‘standing her ground’. Whilst Frank and Lee assisted Kavita, I stood back and observed this interaction.

Of all the examples featured, I would argue this one was particularly significant, as it demonstrated cooperative support on several different levels. Firstly, Frank and Lee commented that Kavita should stand up for herself, implying that she needed to be more assertive and not allow other people to dominate her. Secondly, they both offered creative support, as they were keen for Kavita to capture her concerns, but in a way that would not (potentially) offend and, therefore, suggested another way. Although not mentioned, I felt that this pictorial arrangement was representative of much more than Kavita’s immediate concerns, as Frank and Lee clearly empathised and knew instinctively how she could capture this. Perhaps, this visual of ‘standing ones ground’ embodied their own views and determination to be empowered.

Turning now to how the social model is most commonly associated in educational contexts - a tool to recognise barriers - the students drew attention to disabling areas around college.

**Identifying educational barriers**

Through the first cycle of photo voice, students were encouraged to critically think about their learning environment and to identify disabling areas. I would argue that the following examples not only
demonstrate student comprehension about obstacles being external to them, but also how these obstacles disabled them in different ways.

In response to the question *what do you find difficult at college?* Frank was keen to convey how inaccessible he found the canteen doors (see *Picture 5.8*):

*Frank: I find it difficult to move, in, to move [Me: *Er hum*] when there's all different people going all at once.*

*Me: So people, loads of people [Frank: Yeah] all at once, what going in different directions and?*

*Frank: No, all trying to get out the canteen door.*

*Me: Right, ok.*

*Frank: Hannah, because some people are not very nice when they're running past me. Because, I'm not stable on my feet.*

In addition to identifying this external barrier, Frank was also quick to correct my interpretation. He asserted that the current system of access was causing him difficulties, because of other people, and exacerbating his physical impairment. I suggested that there needed to be an alternative system of
access in place. Frank, Lee and I discussed the possibility of creating signs for the doors e.g. ‘in’ on the left and ‘out’ on the right. This same theme arose again during our first reflective meetings, at the end of Cycle 1 (19th March 2009), where Frank shared his pictures with the rest of the cooperative:

*Lorraine:* What do you think of those doors?

*Frank:* Very difficult!

*Lorraine:* What was that?

*Tracey:* “Very difficult” he says.

*Frank:* I find one door opens one way [Lorraine: Hum] and the other door opens the other way. I find that difficult.

What was interesting about this exchange was how Tracey was eager for Frank to speak for himself, rather than relaying his response in her own words. Also, Frank reiterated that the canteen doors were a difficulty that was external to him, and that by rectifying this problem, it would no longer cause him difficulty.

Following on from Frank, Shaffia recognised an external barrier that she felt was disabling her, when responding to what do you dislike about college? She captured a picture of the common room (see Picture 5.9), to represent noise and crowded places. As I reflected on Shaffia’s response, I noticed that during break times she would either return to the classroom or go to the library. This affirmed to me that while she identified this as an external barrier, she remedied this by spending her leisure time elsewhere. By advocating this dislike she may have felt empowered by articulating why she chose to use other areas around college, thereby inviting others to support and respect her preferences. Indeed, the common room would be disabling to Shaffia, if practitioners ignored her views, implying that their attitudes would also be disabling.
Reflecting upon findings from the second cycle (7th - 8th May 2009), students were invited to share their pictorial responses in relation to ‘future aspirations’. All the students responded that they wanted to work after leaving college. But, when thinking about the potential problems of this, Shaffia expressed concerns about travelling on the bus independently:

Me: Why are you worried about that?

Shaffia: Because, in and out of cars, the bus drives fast it does [Frank: Shaffia] very fast, faster.

Frank: Shaffia, are you worried that other people might nick ya money?

Shaffia: No.

Frank: Because, some people when they’re on buses nick other people’s money.

It was felt that Shaffia did not want to feel rushed when travelling, as this made her feel anxious. She explained that she was looking forward to the group visiting her area (an agreed goal during our first reflective meetings), so that she could familiarise herself with local amenities and public transport links. To which Frank commented:

Picture 5.9 Shaffia: common room
Hannah, we could always work on that for Shaffia.

Me: Yeah, definitely.

Frank: To see what we can do [Me: Er hum] and then that way then she’ll get an idea [Me: Yeah] of what we’re trying to say.

Shaffia: Hum.

Frank: Is that clear Shaffia?...What I’m saying?

Shaffia: Yeah.

The discussion revealed that it was our collaborative responsibility to ensure environments explored were adapted to be more enabling; this was made clear by Frank’s response. This response being extremely interesting for two reasons, firstly, as mentioned, Frank identified this as ‘our problem’ to solve, and secondly, he understood ‘we’ to mean student and practitioner co-researchers working in partnership. This implied that a transition had occurred, where the focus had moved away from the learning disabled students to the disabled/external context, and that collaboration was seen as the way to address these barriers.

I now discuss how student co-researchers utilised a social model to exert political activism, as they projected their voices beyond the college. As noted in earlier chapters, it is essential that researchers with learning difficulties be acknowledged, through their collective empowerment, in research communities.

**Exerting political activism: designing and presenting a poster**

Although I was eager for our findings to be disseminated beyond the immediate context, so that student voices could contribute to social model activism, I was unsure about how this could be achieved. As it was my responsibility to bridge these gaps, I searched for presentation opportunities. This came along when the Centre for Excellence in Enquiry-Based Learning invited us to present our work at a day conference (25th March 2009) that they were hosting. They wanted to hear about student voice and collaborative experiences of working together. The following discussion traces how this process unfolded and how students used this avenue to express their views and make their presence known.
After informing the group about this opportunity, some of the students were apprehensive, stating that they were worried about strangers asking them questions. I explained that delegates may ask them questions, but not to put them on the spot and to make them feel uncomfortable, but rather because they were interested in learning from them. With this concern openly discussed, everyone expressed that they were keen to talk about our work. We decided that a poster presentation would be a good idea, as this would be a joint venture and an accessible medium in which to present our findings. I then borrowed some posters from a colleague at the university, to use as inspiration and guidance (see Picture 5.10).

It was at this point that I realised that researchers with learning difficulties have only ever written about their endeavours as a collaborative, and have never presented these experiences as a poster. Subsequently, researcher accounts of co-creating a poster have not been written about, suggesting that our inquiry could impart further understanding about this experience to the research community (i.e. through a journal article). I felt this was a significant finding in itself, which made me extend a further invitation to co-researchers to co-write an article together at a later date.

As we were without a Smartboard, student co-researchers decided to create their own presentations on flip chart paper, which we then amalgamated into one larger poster (which I constructed). Being in a facilitatory role, I saw it as my responsibility to ensure that everyone’s voices were being represented. When creating their own personal posters, Shaffia, James and Claudine printed off all our saved pictures (see Picture 5.11), taken during our training sessions and other activities engaged in i.e. body collages, reflective journals, portfolios, student interviews and photo voice activities. The students then sifted through the images, recognising their own personal pictures and deciding which ones they wanted to exhibit. James found some additional images online; he used one of them to draw a little picture of himself with an extended thought bubble to depict something that he liked (see Diagram 5.1). Lee also drew some images, which I managed to capture (see Picture 5.12).

In my diary I noted:

*Only realised afterwards, that the task of creating a poster has enabled me to engage in another process of student validation. Indeed, the students have recognised and reviewed their photos and shared their thoughts about these.*
Picture 5.10 Co-researchers looking at poster examples

Picture 5.11 Shaffia, James and Claudine looking for pictures
Reflecting upon this further, I concluded that separate student validation sessions seemed rather unnecessary, as discussions about their photos had already occurred. I also felt that these could be elaborated upon during the reflective meetings, and that this designated space would suffice for the following cycle.

Diagram 5.1

James’s drawing of himself thinking about ‘Digimon’

Picture 5.12 Lee drawing some pictures for the poster
Also, whilst constructing the poster, another pertinent issue arose about confidentiality, as co-researcher identities and the college name were to be disclosed. After bringing all our different ideas together, we then sat round the table and discussed these ethical matters at length. I reminded everyone that this was a voluntary inquiry, and that if, for whatever reasons, they felt unhappy about participating and, indeed, having their identity on display that they could object or use a pseudonym. Shaffia initially stated that while she was happy to have her pictures on the poster, she wanted to use a pseudonym. However, she later changed her mind and asked me to put her real name on the poster. As the conversation evolved from discussing this particular conference to the possibility of attending others and potential for publications, all the co-researchers stated that they wanted to be identified and gave me verbal consent to use their names. It seemed that the students were eager to showcase their findings and wanted others to acknowledge their researcher status. In my journal I wrote:

*Like with independent advocacy groups, maybe the students feel empowered by others recognising them. It seems I have underestimated the value of full disclosure, perhaps being too caught up in ethical codes of practice and overlooking the empowering experience of ownership.*

On the day of the conference (25th March 2008) we presented our poster (refer to *Picture 5.13*) and co-researchers spoke to other delegates (see *Picture 5.14*); with Lee even accompanying a delegate around as she viewed other posters. Although we had entered our poster to participate and demonstrate student voice in action, we were awarded second prize in the poster competition. The following day I met with everyone to discuss what we had learnt from our poster experience and whether we could share any lessons learnt with the research community. Findings from this dialogue, as well as my own reflections, are to inform a journal article (which I am currently working on).
Our poster on display at the conference

Lee talking to a delegate
In the proceeding section I discuss the impact of the second ideological framework, MI theory, and the revised process that was generated from this. Drawing upon the evidence of what happened I illustrate how co-researchers deconstructed deficit assumptions through co-constructing alternative tangible ways of understanding learner diversity.

**Implementing MI theory**

As I have explained, the second ideological framework that was introduced was MI theory. In a similar way to the social model of disability, this was the impetus upon which the body collage method (second cycle revisions) was formulated. The following section tells how this alternative theory was received and evaluates the method in practice, with selected evidence of each student ‘reconstructing (reclaiming) their intellectual identity’.

**Introducing MI theory**

The theory was introduced to co-researchers during meeting 4 (23rd October 2008), where I invited students to share their thoughts about what they felt ‘intelligence’ meant. The following discussion took place:

*Frank: It means doing something by, by yourself.*

*Me: Right.*

*Shaffia: Making it yourself.*

*Me: Ok, doing something by yourself, yeah.*

*Shaffia: Hum.*

*Lorraine: Have you heard of the word intelligence before Lee?*

*James: Erm, smart.*

*Me: Yeah, smart.*

*Lorraine: What do you think smart means Lee?*
James: Brainiac.

Tracey: Hum.

Me: Like a brainiac.

Lorraine: Brainiac? (Tracey chuckles). That's a good word [Shaffia: Hum] to do with the [James: Brain]

Me: That's right.

Shaffia: Hum.

Lorraine: Intelligence?

Kavita: Yeah.

Lorraine: Some people say IQ, have you heard of IQ?

Kavita: Yeah IQ [Shaffia: No].

James: IQ.

Shaffia: I don’t.

James: Like a scientist.

I then asked them whether they thought that they were intelligent and invited them to reflect on their educational experiences. Most of the students responded with ‘no’, stating that they found reading and writing difficult.

This initial dialogue was extremely insightful, as the students evidently knew what ‘intelligence’ inferred, as they equated this with being ‘independent’, ‘smart’, with James even using the term ‘brainiac’ and this being personified as a ‘scientist’. What was also interesting was whilst the students had heard of the term IQ, they did not associate this with intelligence tests and comparisons. However, James did make the connection between IQ and scientist; suggesting that this was a powerful connotation that he had observed.
From this dialogue, I was curious to learn what the students’ views were about their own intellect. I wanted to gauge how much social awareness they had, in relation to their own educational status, and how much bearing specialist/separate provision had upon this understanding. Most of the students felt that they were not very intellectual, attributing this solely to linguistic skills. Such responses confirmed to me that they were self-aware about how others intellectually perceived them, and, subsequently, their educational placement (exclusion). Keen to move away from the deficit present and to critically look at the social construction of generalised intelligence, I introduced the theory of MI.

**Reconstructing (reclaiming) their intellectual identity**

Having trialled the body collage method during our first cycle (throughout November 2008), the students stated that they found the vast selection of images a bit confusing. Practitioners also commented that they found the selection of different images difficult to interpret when reviewing the collages again, in terms of understanding what the students liked and disliked. From this feedback, I decided to revise the format slightly to make it easier to identify choices. I produced two identical sets of images, one with blue borders representing activities students found easy and/or liked with a happy face and the other with red borders for dislikes and activities they found more difficult with a sad face (see *Figure 5.1 Colour coded smilies to assist in selecting intelligences images*). In each set there were six to eight images representing each of the eight intelligences. Although I used some of the same images from the previous activity, I created new packs. I did this for two fundamental reasons, firstly I wanted to diversify the collection of images and secondly, I wanted to ensure that it was credible, as I was concerned that the students might make the same choices again.

*Figure 5.1 Colour coded smilies to assist in selecting intelligences images*
These subtle changes seemed to have made the activity instantly more accessible (2nd April 2009), as students commented that they found it easier to follow. This was also evident from practitioner feedback, as they observed that students were more focused and engaged whilst making their selections, to the extent of being more astute when expounding and reflecting upon their choices. In addition, I observed that everyone seemed to be working more collaboratively, as the students appeared to be more reflexive and thus how they wanted practitioners to support them whilst making their selections. For example, Mark assisted Shaffia by explaining what the visuals might infer and encouraged her to put a tick by the images she wanted to cut out. This was an interesting development, as during our first cycle practitioners were a little unclear as to what their responsibilities were, tending to withdraw and only participating when the students presented their collages.

In what follows, segments from student explanations about their body collages are presented, along with their self-identified intellectual strengths (exhibited as a table) and my own reflective analysis.

Shaffia was first to expound upon her newly selected images (see Picture 5.15):

![Picture 5.15 Shaffia explaining her second cycle selection of images](image)
This is about, erm…animals [Me: Er hum], I don’t like football, I don’t like writing. That is sad, crying, going to the gym, I don’t like that.

Lorraine: You don’t like going to the gym?

Shaffia: No!

Lorraine: Oh, I thought you did [Shaffia: Erm (looking at another image)]. It just shows you (addressing everyone else).

Shaffia: Don’t like going to the gym.

This dialogue demonstrated how Shaffia was able to recollect why she chose a red boarded image showing a physical activity, as this represented a strong dislike, that she was keen to convey. By advocating this dislike, Lorraine became informed, as she had assumed that Shaffia liked their Friday morning sessions at the gym. Compared with Shaffia’s earlier body collage, she decided to use more images to explain who she was. This may have been for a number of different reasons, perhaps the colour coding distinctions allowed her to be more decisive, maybe she gained more self understanding (having engaged in the other voice activities), or heeded Frank’s earlier commentary about her needing to use more images. As a result, it seemed Shaffia’s collage enabled her to communicate her preferences with more conviction, as the array of images selected seemed to act as useful prompts allowing her to elaborate further.

Presented below are Shaffia’s self-identified intellectual strengths (Table 5.1), along with some of my observations:
Shaffia recognised that she had strengths in Spatial Intelligence, explaining that she liked creative arts and activities where she could use her hands. She also expressed an appreciation for Hindi music, and thought she was a good dancer. However, Shaffia added that she liked to dance on her own and to music that was not too loud.

Table 5.1 Shaffia’s self-identified intellectual strengths

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Kavita was next to present her body collage. What was interesting about this presentation was her perceptiveness, as she expounded upon her choices with greater clarity. She also explained that although she liked some activities featured (with blue borders), she found them difficult (see also Frank further down). Lorraine and I thought that these choices could be circled, so that Kavita and the rest of the group could be reminded about their significance. Lorraine also suggested that a visual of the 'help' sign might be a useful addition to the images, as the students could identify where they needed some extra support to do something that they enjoyed.

Kavita’s choice of blue boarded images directed our attention again towards her passion for gardening and outdoor activities. This affirmed that our agreed goals for Kavita were indeed aspirations that she wanted us to support her with. During this previous reflective meeting (12th March 2009), I informed the group that Kavita had expressed an interest in gardening (this being evident from her first body collage). Lorraine also added that Kavita had mentioned to her on numerous occasions that she liked flowers and being outside. From this, practitioner co-researchers were eager to accommodate and play to these (naturalistic) intellectual strengths to ensure that Kavita’s voice was being heard. As such, it was agreed that more naturalistic activities would be incorporated into sessions and that this information would be passed onto the supportive employment agency that were working with Kavita at the time.

Kavita’s selection of images are presented below (Table 5.2). I expound upon some of her choices and draw attention to particular areas that she liked, but found challenging.
Kavita stated again how much she liked nature and agriculture, feeling that her strengths lay in this particular intelligence. She expressed an interest in singing and listening to music. Kavita also advocated that friendship and helping others was very important to her.

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**Table 5.2 Kavita’s self-identified intellectual strengths**

She explained that although she enjoyed physical activities, she found them challenging, due to difficulties with her hand eye coordination.
James then expounded upon what his selected images meant (see *Picture 5.16*):

*Picture 5.16 James explaining his second cycle selection of images*

I don’t like football. I like to run, I like painting, I like computers. Sometimes I like to be with friends. I like money. I like pets. I also, I like, I know what’s good for me and what’s not good for me.

James’s explanations were similar to his earlier reflections, as he, like Kavita, seemed to understand himself very well. Although he displayed the same image of people during the previous cycle, he stated that he liked “some friends”. However, this time round James commented that he “sometimes likes to be with friends”, which implied a different understanding of social interaction. James expressed “I know what’s good for me…” pointing to the man standing by his own reflection (to represent Intrapersonal Intelligence), which I felt was a very astute observation. Co-researchers also confirmed that James liked to go to the library by himself and borrow graphic novels, which he would study intently. Although indeed preferring his own company, he also acknowledged that other people featured and mattered in his life.

To accompany this analysis, I present James’s collection of images (*table 5.3*).
James understood his strengths to be in the creative arts and physical activities. He relished opportunities to use his hands and come up with innovative ideas.

As mentioned above, he saw another strength in his abilities to be self-reflective and methodical; this perhaps also explaining his fascination with computer technologies.

Table 5.3 James’s self-identified intellectual strengths

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Frank followed (see Picture 5.17):

![Frank sticking up his second cycle images](image)

**Picture 5.17 Frank sticking up his second cycle images**

Frank stuck up the same image of playing football twice, as a likes/strength and as dislike/finds difficult, to which Mark explored further:

Can you tell me Frank why you've got football on the side you don't like and football on the side you do like?

Frank: Well, well I, I like playing football, but it's just when people get a bit rough with me I start to fall over

Mark: Right.

Me: Hum.

Frank: I start to fall over. I get back up and tell that person not to be so rough with me [Mark: Right], because I'm not steady on me feet.

Mark: So what's the football on the blue side then?

Frank: Well, I like playing it [Mark: Right] and I like watching it as well.
As with Kavita, Frank wanted to affirm that although he liked football, he sometimes found it challenging, due to its competitive physical nature. However, I draw upon this example not to highlight Frank’s limitations in a deficit sense, but rather to illustrate how in-depth his own self-analysis was. Frank also stated that he found computer keyboards frustrating to use, as the letters were too small. As a result of this, we talked about the accessible keyboards used over at Overmead campus, which have larger, alphabetical coloured keys. Lorraine commented that she would inquire about getting this equipment for their classroom as well. By addressing this point, it seemed Frank not only exposed another external barrier (through a social model approach), but was seen as a credible source of knowledge, as practitioners were eager to rectify these disabling circumstances.

As we reflected upon Frank’s body collage, his social characteristics (Interpersonal Intelligence) dominated the conversation, as co-researchers stated that he was a good listener and was very responsible, giving his full commitment to college activities. Lee added to this (at a later date) by stating that Frank made him happy because he would often help him.

Presented below are Frank’s self-identified intellectual strengths (*Table 5.4*) and some of my observations about these.
Frank explained that music was a prominent feature in his life, as he liked to play instruments and listen to a variety of different music. He also recognised that he had strengths in self-awareness and in understanding the needs of others. Frank noted that he was an extremely sociable person.

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As mentioned above, whilst he acknowledged that he liked football, he found it challenging to play.
As Lee was away, he presented his collage at a later date (23\textsuperscript{rd} April 2009). With no video/audio recording, I am only able to present Lee’s selected intelligences images (see Table 5.5) and draw tentative conclusions from these. From what is displayed, it is evident that Lee saw his strengths in Bodily-kinesthetic and Interpersonal intelligences and enjoyed his researcher role of taking pictures.

When thinking about why he had selected the same picture to represent like and dislike, this may have been due to what is actually happening in the image (i.e. according to Lee’s interpretation). For example, under Interpersonal, there is what appears to be a woman comforting a young boy. Lee may have selected this image to draw our attention to the fact that he felt he was empathic, believing his strengths to lay in comforting others, and that he dislikes seeing others upset. From my own observations and interactions with Lee, I feel that this is very characteristic of him e.g. when the students went Christmas shopping (Informal observation - 26\textsuperscript{th} November 2008), one of them left their belongings in the food court, leaving Lorraine to go back and look for them. As we made our way out, Lee was very concerned by this, as he kept asking me where Lorraine was going and whether he could do anything to help look for the missing items.
He has clearly demonstrated his creative strengths e.g. in his abilities to use the camera.

Lee was very enthusiastic about engaging in physical activities.

He has shown much empathy towards others, perhaps drawing upon his own emotional understanding of self.

### Table 5.5 Lee’s self-identified intellectual strengths

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**Bodily-kinesthetic**

**Intrapersonal**

**Interpersonal**

**Naturalistic**
It seemed that by revising the body collage method the students were able to demonstrate their self-
reflective skills and analysis with more confidence. Indeed, this intellectual space allowed them to
create and advocate alternative understandings about themselves and project these representations
for others to respond to.

**Conclusion**

Understanding it to be my responsibility to introduce co-researchers to alternative worldviews, I put
forward the ideological frameworks of the social model of disability and MI theory. Throughout the
chapter I drew upon what I deemed to be significant evidence, demonstrating how these alternative
ideas encouraged students to ‘speak up’, asserting their own voices and supporting those of others.
They also exhibited empowerment by recognising external educational barriers and creating and
presenting an academic poster. Further to this, in an attempt to deconstruct deficit homogenised
views about their learner identity, students utilised the body collage method to reconstruct new
intellectual profiles, thereby encouraging practitioners to focus upon their strengths.

From these findings, it would seem the students seized opportunities to represent themselves
differently, perhaps portraying learners/people that they wanted practitioners to know and respond to.
Moreover, by asserting this new found authority, students were enabled to reconstruct new identities
to the extent where, arguably, one-dimensional deficit thinking could no longer co-exist. However,
these findings were taken from my own analysis and must be taken as tentative outcomes, which
need to be compared against direct co-researcher responses presented in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 6. Listening to the voices of co-researchers: identifying central themes

This chapter draws upon data extracted from final student interviews (14-15th May 2009), my own reflections, pictorial responses captured through photo voice (‘future aspirations’: 7-8th May 2009) and dialogue from reflective meetings. But, the majority of this data emerged from direct interview responses, where Frank, Shaffia and myself invited co-researchers to share their experiences and lessons learnt from engaging in this inquiry. I then analysed each of these conversations and drew comparisons between them to identify central (common) themes and other emerging insights (see Appendix 2: Identifying central themes from final interview data).

These findings, as well as those from the other sources mentioned, are presented in line with the first three research questions, namely identifying accessible processes to voice learning preferences, recognising the difficulties of collaborative inquiry and exploring the supportive roles of practitioners. However, as there appeared to be a noticeable change in co-researcher relations and a scarcity of practitioner reflective data, student pictorial responses are explored further to demonstrate how students would like practitioners to support them.

Accessible ways to elicit student voice

In this section findings are presented in relation to processes that the students felt were accessible, in terms of empowering their views and engaging them in self-reflection. Practitioner responses are then explored, where they expound upon processes that they believe were accessible for the students to share their learning preferences, and provided them with valuable (unexpected) insights.

Student views

Most of the students commented that they enjoyed collating work in their portfolios and found this to be an accessible avenue in which to represent themselves. Their reasons for this varied from feeling empowered to encouraging them to be more self-reflective. In terms of feeling empowered, James commented:
I like going on the computer looking for stuff.

Me: Right, what, what for?

James: For, for stuff that explains about me

Me: Er hum. Where would you put that stuff?

James: In my portfolio.

Me: Okay, so you like collecting all those things to [James: Yeah] put in your portfolio?

James’s response was not altogether surprising, as he had expressed before that he liked using the computer. It seemed the portfolio enabled him to tap into his creative skills and search for images, via the internet, that he felt represented him. Perhaps this activity not only gave him the opportunity to use the computer whenever he wanted, but also gave him free rein to assemble findings how he wished. These same skills were also utilised when James designed his own section for our collaborative poster.

For Kavita, the process of reviewing work encouraged her to ask more self-reflective questions, a view Lee also shared. For example:

Me: It makes you happy to do that?

Lee: Yeah and think.

In agreement with Kavita and Lee, Shaffia commented that creating her portfolio made her pause for thought:

I am, I am thinking about new things, pictures [Me: Hum, hum] in the book, portfolio, I don’t know what it is.

Me: Which, which one do you mean?

Shaffia: The portfolio.
It seemed that the portfolios enabled the students to direct how they wanted to be perceived as learners, as they carefully thought about which artefacts to include. In terms of Lee’s response this self-analytical space may not have been granted before, due to communication assumptions (which have already been discussed in the previous chapter). With this opportunity to think about himself, he may have also have felt a sense of empowerment like James. Indeed, being entrusted to assess themselves as learners was evidently an experience they valued. Other processes that the students found to be accessible in sharing their learning preferences were body collages. Both Frank and Shaffia felt that their individual intelligences and other additional insights could be projected with greater clarity. For example:

Shaffia: Hum...I liked erm, I liked this (pointing to the body collage).

Me: The body collage?

Shaffia: The body collage, like say you like, you don’t like.

Me: Er hum.

Shaffia: I liked that.

Frank: I think, I think the body collage [Me: Hum]...because it’s showing people what I dislike and what I like.

Evidently, the revised (second cycle) method allowed them to focus these understandings, as both students felt they could present themselves with confidence. It seemed colour coding distinctions (i.e. likes/dislikes) created focused channels of communication and allowed others to be clear about these distinctions. By adapting this method to make it more accessible, another interesting finding emerged, as James commented:

I’ve learnt about people being different.

Unlike Shaffia who initially found self-representation challenging (see previous chapter), James felt he knew himself already and learnt from the activity in other ways. Indeed, body collages allowed him to interact with others and reflect upon their diverse intellectual profiles to come to this conclusion.
What also came out of this interview data was how much some of the students enjoyed capturing pictures during the photo voice tasks and attending conferences. For Frank having the opportunity to showcase findings enabled him to network with other people. This reaffirmed to me why it was so essential to exhibit voice work outside the college, as their contributions were recognised and valued by the research community.

**Practitioner views**

Extending the views felt by Frank and Shaffia about the body collage method, Mark also commented:

*Probably the body collage, because as you know I'm relatively new to your group and, the body collage enabled me to find out lots of things about you as individuals.*

It seemed that not only did this method allow accessible individual profiles to be presented, but it allowed a (then) newcomer to understand what the students were advocating. In this sense, it served as a useful induction tool. Both Lorraine and Claudine concurred with Mark’s observations. Lorraine inferred that by allocating student roles and identifying intelligences, through body collages, these had allowed her to see the students in a more holistic way:

...*learning to let Shaffia speak, and Shaffia learning to let you speak, I suppose that’s been a good thing, and, and you know, your intelligences, that you are a lot, there’s a lot more to you isn’t there?*

Interestingly, she returned to this line of thought, when questioned *what she had learnt about the students?*:

*I’ve learnt that there’s more to you than meets the eye (laughing), because we’ve, have you heard that term, scratch the surface? I think in college we sometimes just scratch the surface of things, but I think it’s been a good vehicle, a good method of finding out more about you and what, what you want out of life and not what we think you need.*

From these responses it seemed Lorraine was not only now seeing the students as mature adults, able to share researcher responsibilities, but was also viewing them as multi-dimensional learners. I found the ‘laugh’ after her statement particularly significant, as this suggested one of two things, either she felt embarrassed by her previous disabling assumptions, or she was astonished by the
self-determination shown (e.g. when Shaffia told her to be quiet). Like with her other colleagues, Claudine felt that body collages enabled them to learn about students individually:

_I think the body collages mainly, maybe number one, erm, because we learnt more about you and what you liked and what you didn’t like and also the intelligences._

Further on in the conversation with Frank and Shaffia she also commented:

_I’ve learnt a lot about you students, erm, just little things from things that you like, what you don’t like and what you think you’re good at and what you think you’re not good at, because I might think you’re good at something and you might think differently, so learnt, I’ve learnt in that way...I’ve learnt more about you all. And also, you’re taking pictures around college, I learnt a lot from that, because I would have given different answers about you, but it’s not about me giving answers it’s about you giving answers, so I learnt from that._

From this, Claudine agreed with Lorraine, that they should be standing back and letting the students speak for themselves. She also felt that photo voice was an informative method, a view that was also shared by Lorraine and Tracey. Indeed, Lorraine felt that capturing pictures helped to stimulate student reflection:

_...I think going around the college seemed to have worked, didn’t it? Finding the different areas that you liked in college helped to stimulate your mind into thinking “do you know what, I quite like this place here”, yes?_ 

Tracey felt that photo voice allowed the students to control the research process:

_I’d probably say the cameras, because I think you was more involved in working with the cameras._

But, what I found interesting from these responses was that practitioners had not accompanied the students whilst they were engaged in the ‘walk and talk’ element of photo voice. This made me wonder what evidence, for example, Tracey had based her views on? At the time Frank, Shaffia and I did not probe further, so I can only speculate that she assumed students felt in control, perhaps linking this to Lee and James’s researcher roles.
As Frank had mentioned in the previous section, both Lorraine and Mark felt that designing and presenting work at research conferences was beneficial, as they felt this encouraged students to work together on a joint venture and enabled them to engage with other communities. For example, Lorraine stated:

*I think doing the poster was helpful, you know those little circles, where it said a little bit about you, and, and what we came up with for the poster that worked quite well and you interacting with people at the conference.*

It appeared she felt that the cooperative process not only enabled the students to self-advocate about immediate issues, but also those beyond the college. Mark also commented:

*The thing that brought everything together, for me, was when you worked on the poster, because erm, that was er, a venture that you all took on together as a group, you got involved with as a group and you were able to put your individual input into that as well. And that, not only did you do here, but that went outside, which is very important to show people outside the college what sort of people you are and what sort of things you were doing...*

Concurring with Lorraine, Mark felt that the poster encouraged the students to extend their voices beyond the immediate context. He asserted that this was “important”, perhaps implying that other people needed to engage with what he had learnt i.e. that the students were capable of directing their own learning and empowering themselves.

In what follows, I present student responses to explore the evolving relationships between them and practitioners and how these changing conditions seemed to have facilitated their self-advocacy.

**Creating relationships of understanding**

As I observed a change in the relational dynamics between students and practitioners, I was eager to explore these impressions further. Subsequently, I drew upon student responses, in relation to their roles and equal status, as I noticed that they all commented that these specific responsibilities were important to them. These views are presented along with my own thoughts and followed by further student insights about how they felt practitioners have responded to them since undertaking the inquiry.
Equal roles of responsibility:

Kavita stated that she had learnt a lot about herself from performing her researcher role:

Getting the diaries out and helping the others, getting the, getting the portfolios out for the others.

Me: So is that your role [Kavita: Yeah] in the research to do that?

Kavita: Yeah.

What was interesting from her response, was how she associated it with ‘helping the others’. Her role of organising files, journals and portfolios and ensuring co-researchers had these when they needed them was clearly suited to her character. Kavita evidently felt that this responsibility would play to her strengths and, as noted above, confirmed that she was a ‘helpful person’. Like Kavita, James also commented that his role enabled him to learn more about himself:

I like to do some stuff. I like to do filming.

Me: Er hum. So that was something which was new to you [James: Yeah] before you did the project?

James: Yeah.

James was originally only going to download pictures from the camera onto the computer, with Lee doing all the filming. But somewhere along the way, Lee decided to be in charge of the camera and James the video camera. Although at first a little unsure about how to use the video camera, James soon learnt how to use this and would often begin filming before invited to do so by the chair-person. As such, he has mastered this skill and has shown further interest in downloading data captured onto the computer. In agreement with Kavita, Lee also advocated that he really enjoyed supporting other co-researchers during the photo voice activity:

Yeah. Me and Frank (with accompanying sign).

Me: So you and Frank talking?

Lee: Er...walking (with accompanying sign).
Me: Walking? So do you mean, erm, last week? [Lee: Yeah] When you were taking photographs?

Lee: Yeah.

As well as relishing his role of being in charge of the camera, Lee also seemed to like the responsibility of assisting others when capturing their images. Like Kavita, understanding himself to be a ‘helpful’ person.

But for Shaffia, her chairing duties allowed her to utilise this status to assert her authority, as she was enthusiastic to account the moment when she asked Lorraine to be quiet:

“Say Lorraine, sorry not, not talking so much Lorraine” (she laughs afterwards).

Frank: (laughing) Oh Shaffia you make me laugh.

Shaffia: You’d be sitting there and look [Me: I remember] you sitting there and I sitting here and look “I’m talking, you’re not talking”.

Me: I remember the knocking (knocking on the table) on the table (Frank laughs).

Shaffia: Yeah.

Me: So you’ve, you’ve enjoyed having a bit more authority? [Shaffia: Yeah] Having a bit more power?

Shaffia: Yeah, I did tell Lorraine “No talking so much, I’m talking”.

Me: Hum. Cos, the chairperson’s responsibility is the one who is in charge, making sure [Shaffia: Me] we’re organised.

Frank: Yeah.

Shaffia: Me and Frank.

When assessing these student responses, it seemed that having a role meant more than just having a specific responsibility, as this was also about how others perceived them. As Kavita explained, it involved her ‘helping others’, and as Lee implied, ‘assisting others’ in having a voice. Perhaps these
designated roles placed the students in a supporter role (like that of the practitioners), rather than the supported position that they were usually accustomed to. They may have felt a sense of empowerment from being needed, as no one else could perform their specific duties. As is evident from Shaffia’s response, having a role equal to that of a practitioner elevated her status and thus enabled her to self-advocate freely. It seemed that having equal status enabled the students to develop their self-confidence and to assert their own critical gaze upon the context. Thus this made them question and challenge their current circumstances, to the extent where they (e.g. Shaffia) reprimanded practitioners for talking out of turn.

Although the students evidently felt empowered through these roles, I was eager to examine how receptive they felt practitioners were towards them. The following student accounts were in response to: do you feel staff understand you better, if so why?

**Practitioner understandings:**

James commented that he felt practitioners understood him and perceived him in a different way:

*Yeah, because they have been able to trust me.*

Me: *So you feel that staff erm, trust you more now?*

James: *Yeah.*

Me: *Okay, why?*

James: *Because, I’m an adult.*

This exchange implied that James felt he had been given opportunities in which to exhibit his trustworthiness/maturity. Perhaps being entrusted with the video camera, and more importantly space in which to voice his preferences, enabled practitioners to see that he could be trusted. Such a display of trustworthiness allowed him to assert his adult status, and to possibly gain a firmer conviction of this. However, for Lee this was more about the personal understandings that practitioners obtained from his learner preferences. For example:
Me: What was that Lee, you?

Shaffia: Personal space.

Me: So you think they understand that about you now?

Lee: Yeah.

This made me think back to our first reflective meetings (end of Cycle 1: 5th March 2009), where Lee expounded upon his pictorial responses. In answer to the question: What do you find difficult at college, Lee captured the staircase by the main entrance (see Picture 6.1). He stated that personal space was important to him and that he did not like to be pushed or shoved (using accompanying signs). With this explanation Tracey expressed surprise, as she explained that Lee would often wait by the main doors, allowing other people to pass, before walking through them himself. She had assumed, up until this point, that he liked opening the doors for other people, rather than this being about him maintaining his personal space.

![Picture 6.1 Lee: personal space](image)

Having this visual prompt allowed Lee to raise this issue, as it was evidently something that was causing him concern. He may have felt relieved, when this issue was brought to the attention of
practitioners, as they could now understand his actions. From his later interview response, this appeared to be the case, as practitioners may have altered their approaches towards him (e.g. perhaps giving him more space in the classroom).

Shaffia felt that practitioners were consulting more with them, attributing this to group discussions and, interestingly, the body collage method:

Do staff understand me? They do talk to us.

[Text taken out]

Me: Okay, why?

Shaffia: Because I like to [Me: Right] They, they, all the group talk to us, Lorraine talks to us as well [Me: Er hum] and, and Claudine, Tracey...[Me: So by us] all the group.

[Text taken out]

Me: Er hum. So you think that we, from, by being involved in this research we get you better?

Shaffia: Yes.

Me: Do you think that we would have understood you even if we hadn’t done the research?

Shaffia: No.

Me: No? So the research, you believe has helped?

Shaffia: Yes.

Me: Which bit of the research do you think has been best at us understanding you?

Shaffia pointed to her body collage

Frank concurred with Shaffia’s observations, as he explained:
The research has helped with them listening, because if we didn’t do this research, if, they would have listened, but they just wouldn’t have had the time, because they were busy.

Me: Which ones of the methods do you think have been good at getting people to listen to what you have to say?...

Frank: I think, I think the body collage [Me: Hum] and the, and the, and the photos, because it’s showing people what I dislike and what I like.

Both students felt that cooperative processes, in particular group meetings, body collages and photo voice, made the practitioners pause and actively listen to what they had to say. As Frank stated, practitioners may have wanted to engage with student voice before, but felt that they did not have the time, as they were busy with other commitments. However, it seemed that reflective meetings, where everyone was engaged (around a central theme), coupled with individual explanations about intellectual profiles and pictorial responses about the educational context made practitioners eager to seek these views.

From recognising processes that were felt to be accessible and evidently effecting relational dynamics, I examine the opposite end of the spectrum, to identify difficulties, complexities and tensions of collaborative voice work. These findings are extracted from my reflective accounts and further interview findings.

**Recognising difficulties**

I have identified several themes that have caused difficulties whilst carrying out this inquiry. The first of these: ‘co-constructing space’, recounts my experiences and the lessons learnt from trying to set up a cooperative at another campus before initiating this at Newton. This is followed by: ‘inaccessible processes’, where co-researchers and I recognised processes that were felt to be inaccessible and thus created additional barriers for students to voice. Under ‘power imbalances’ I present the views of practitioners, as they expound upon processes that they felt were in danger of shifting the power in their favour, rather than that of the students. The last theme: ‘practitioner journals’, shares practitioner views about their own reflective journals.
Co-constructing space

I met with my Overmead colleagues at the beginning of term (5th September 2008). During this informal meeting, I gave them all handouts that I had prepared explaining the proposed inquiry with an accompanying timetable. I also pulled up the same document on my laptop and showed a few slides taken from my proposed research presentation. Anna, Marcus (who were involved in my MSc research) and Hester were all present during this meeting. Hester had just taken on the role as co-tutor, working alongside Marcus. Janet, as the curriculum manager, was also present, as she was eager for student voice activities to continue (being a continuation of my MSc research). However, rather than taking on an active role herself, she wanted to sit in on initial meetings proposed and observe proceedings. Some of the key issues that emerged from this first meeting were:

- Practitioners decided that lunchtimes would be the most convenient time for them to attend cooperative meetings and because of this...
- Support staff would be unable to attend, as they would be supporting other students.
- Students would be invited, rather than selected to take part in the inquiry. It was also discussed at length that students would need to be fully aware about what they are committing to (i.e. a yearlong inquiry, where meetings would be held over lunchtime).

As I reflected upon the following induction meeting that I held with the students (16th September 2008), I noticed that most of Marcus and Hester’s students seemed rather reluctant to sign up. This led me to believe that maybe they were put off from participating because research meetings were scheduled during their lunch breaks. I wrote in my journal:

> Why did the meetings have to take place at this time, as the aim of the inquiry is supposed to be about creating space and making time in which to listen to these ‘silenced’ voices? This seems rather at odds with what I am trying to do, and perceiving student voice as something as an extra, rather than as an educational priority!

As my colleagues had made this decision and their input being essential to the inquiry, I found myself somewhat duty bound. This put me in a difficult position, as at the time, I questioned whether I could heed their requests whilst also serving the interests of the students. In response I wrote:
It seems that such conflicting agendas are to be expected when trying to explore cooperative processes in an educational context.

As the inquiry unfolded (23rd, 30th September through to 7th October 2008) one of Hester’s students decided that she did not want to participate after the second meeting. Her other student attended the meetings, but soon raised concerns about missing out on leisure time spent with friends. This same student also stated that she only came along to the meetings, because Anna had told her that I would give them chocolates. Both Anna’s students attended, but only one of them seemed committed, as he kept asking questions and was eager to engage in dialogue. Anna informed me that throughout the week, he would keep referring to himself as a co-researcher and seemed to have a heightened sense of self-esteem. Despite this having a positive impact on this particular student, I could see that the other students had been cajoled into attending and were not really all that interested. Coupled with this was also the lack of commitment shown by practitioners. In spite of me providing them with all the relevant information and dates needed, their involvement became very inconsistent.

Indeed, despite my best efforts, this cooperative attempt fell apart, as it was not led by the students, nor deemed a facilitatory avenue in which to enable them to ‘speak up’. Additionally, support staff, who spent most of their time with these students, were not involved because of scheduled meeting times. Of the practitioners that had attended, they seemed to invite student voice as a tokenistic gesture, rather than understanding the processes as possible means in which to meaningfully engage with student voice.

I learnt that even before cultivating space in which to co-create, ‘commitment’ and ‘time’ would be required first. It is only once practitioners and students have committed themselves to form a cooperative that they together can timetable when they wish to hold meetings/carry out methods. This was certainly the case when Lorraine expressed an initial interest, as I recalled:

She stated that if I were to conduct the inquiry at Newton that she would make the time during Thursday afternoon sessions to hold cooperative meetings and other exploratory processes. Lorraine seemed really enthusiastic about the empowering nature of the inquiry, stating that we need to learn from the students and that this sounded like a good opportunity to do so (30th September 2008).
Inaccessible processes

When critically reflecting upon my facilitatory role and how accessible information disseminated to other co-researchers was, I was reminded about the interview training that I organised. During this particular training session (22\textsuperscript{nd} January 2008), I explained to everyone that there were different types of questions that could be asked and that this varied depending upon what you were trying to find out. However in my journal I wrote:

\texttt{Being critical, I think I presented too much information. Are people really going to remember all this? The likelihood is pretty slim, especially when I used the same terminology as in the text book (tutt)! I should have put it in layman’s terms and used more visual examples to illustrate these points.}

Although essential for the students, especially for Frank and Shaffia, to be made aware of different interviewing techniques, the training provided was evidently inaccessible. I seemed to have veered into tokenism territory and overlooked the fact that this was supposed to enable and be of use to student co-researchers. The practitioners were also observant about the difficulties I encountered whilst trying to bridge the academic and practice divide. For example, during the final interviews with Frank and Shaffia (14-15\textsuperscript{th} May 2009) three of them commented:

\texttt{Mark: [...] Hannah comes from a very academic background, and, and we don’t and so sometimes Hannah erm, talked a lot about academia and er, studies and things like that, which didn’t mean very much to me or perhaps not much to you either.}

\texttt{Lorraine: Possibly the, sometimes the long sitting around the table. Erm, now that’s a difficult one, because Hannah’s got to get quite a lot of stuff down that’s academic, erm, you know for her research... And I don’t think all of you, but one or two of you might have got a bit agitated, fallen asleep, yawned, you know? (laughing) You know, just occasionally maybe.}

\texttt{Claudine: [...] In the session where we were sat in here and it was a lot of talking there was only a few students that really understood, I thought, certain parts of it and so they weren’t really joining in and answering the questions. But, there was a few that really did and really did get involved, so maybe, that, that part of it. I would say maybe more practical.}
It would appear I ‘over egged the pudding’, being driven by my own researcher expectations, and was not applying enough contextual sensitivity. Indeed, perhaps I allowed my academic responsibilities to dominate my co-researcher role and led the dialogue, rather than facilitating discussions. As Claudine remarked, “practical” reflective activities were more effective at engaging everyone’s attention and participation, rather than everyone sitting around a table learning the fundamentals of research production. But moving away from cooperative meetings, to evaluating methods employed, both Shaffia and Frank stated that they found the reflective journals challenging.

This emerged when they were asked what did you find difficult about the research:

Shaffia: Erm, the book.

Me: The reflective journal?

Shaffia: Give me some writing, too hard writing.

Me: So you found that difficult?

Shaffia: Hum.

Me: What, what writing or having to think about what you wanna write down?

Shaffia: Think about what you’re writing down.

Me: Er hum. You found that difficult?

Shaffia: No, writing difficult. Thinking and writing down.

Me: So having to think about it and then actually having to write it down?

Shaffia: Yeah.

Me: You found that difficult?

Shaffia: I am, I am difficult writing words.
It seemed Shaffia felt prohibited rather than empowered from utilising her journal, as it relied upon a certain level of literacy skills. This was an important point, as she was one of the co-researchers earlier (during the conversation about ‘intelligence’ in the previous chapter) to explain she found language challenging. Consequently, her journal was probably seen as more of an obstacle, disabling her further, rather than acting as a platform in which to project her voice. Frank concurred with Shaffia, but added that it was an impractical tool:

_Well the journals, I don't think they've, had had, don't think they've been, don't think they've been going on too well [Me: Er hum], because, because we forget to put, we forget to write stuff in there [Me: Er hum] if you know what I mean?_

_Me: Yeah. So you found that quite difficult did you?_

_Frank: Yeah, cos, yeah cos sometimes we've not had the time [Me: Er hum] to._

_ Me: So when you did do it, did you find it difficult to, to write things down or to, to think about what you were doing or both or?_

_Frank: Both._

Frank commented that ‘time’ was a difficulty, as he (along with other co-researchers) forgot to fill them in. This may have been due to them having another college diary, which served to inform family and carers about their daily college activities. Practitioners would often prompt and support students to fill these in. In light of these issues, completing reflective journals was deemed to be rather inaccessible and impractical. Having presented opinions about inaccessible processes, I now turn to address practitioner concerns about particular methods that they believed were in danger of maintaining their hierarchical status.

**Power imbalances**

When practitioner co-researchers were posed with a similar question to the one above i.e. *what methods do you feel have been difficult for us as students and why*, they responded with:
Tracey: Probably the portfolios and journals, because it’s trying to get ya to think for yourself, to put them pictures in, instead of us saying “oh do you think that picture’s good?” So, because it was hard, to come from you, to do that, that’s what I found difficult....We didn’t want to prompt you to say “oh we’ll put that picture in”, so really we didn’t, a lot of you didn’t put a lot in did ya?

Claudine: [...] We didn’t wanna put words into your mouths. So, sometimes it was hard to put down things in that. I think that was it really....as I say I didn’t wanna assume what you wanted to put, or put words in your mouth.

What was interesting about Tracey and Claudine’s responses was the understanding that they had evidently gained, as they were eager for students to make their own decisions. With this in mind, they may have faced daily contradictions about students needing to empower themselves whilst they continued to guide them with filling in their daily college diaries. The students may have also found this confusing, as they may have expected practitioners to continue prompting them when selecting artefacts to put in their portfolios and commentary to include in their journals. But Tracey and Claudine recognised how influential their supportive roles could be, which made them question the creditability of how these methods were employed i.e. was it the student self-advocating or were they repeating what was being suggested to them?

However, despite facing these power dilemmas, both practitioners acknowledged that it was essential for the students to voice their own preferences. Tracey later added that the portfolio method might be more effective if the students were presented with an array of pictures every morning, representing activities from the day before, and invited to select images they wanted to include. She felt that her role could be to print these images out and write additional commentary on the back, with these comments being directed by the students.

As I contemplated further upon how practitioners might support students, I was keen to retrieve extracts from their journals to inform my understandings about these supportive roles. However, as proceeding findings demonstrate this was not feasible.
Practitioner journals

Practitioners were asked what particular aspects they found difficult, and if they had been keeping their reflective journals. All of them commented that they found the journals rather time consuming and impractical:

Tracey: I'd say the journals, I don't think they worked very well at all, because we was forgetting to do em, weren't we and then find, finding the time. I forgot to do mine as well half of the time.

Lorraine: I haven't been keeping it, because of the pressures of the job at the moment.

Claudine: I did start the journal, but then I stopped after a while, erm, the reason why is because I wasn't sure what I was supposed to be putting there and erm, that's why really. Because a lot of what I did put in there was sort of questioning myself and what I saw in the sessions and I wasn't sure if that was the correct way to do it. So, yeah.

Although initially writing in her journal, Claudine was confused about its purpose, unsure whether this was to record insights about the students as learners or a space in which to critically reflect upon her own practices. I attribute these confusions to how the method was conveyed and my attention mainly being on student co-researchers. However, despite this confusion, the method was evidently ineffective at engaging reflection, which meant that I had to create other avenues for this to happen (see the following chapter).

With no data to analyse about practitioner supportive roles, I decided to draw upon further student data about how they perceived these responsibilities. In this final discussion I review cooperative dialogue and student pictorial responses.

Practitioner support

Findings are presented about how students would like practitioners to support them, both at college and through transition into work. These are broken under the two headings: ‘Establishing links with local communities’ and ‘providing employment opportunities’.
Establishing links with local communities

During our first reflective meetings (end of Cycle 1: 19th March 2009) we discussed Frank’s findings to decide upon goals for the next cycle. Frank stated that he wanted to use the gym independently (from one of his images). Lorraine mentioned that the students could use the college gym whenever they liked, and did not have to wait until Friday mornings (when timetabled). The conversation then evolved to discussing what local leisure facilities were available to Frank, nearby to where he lived. As a result, we decided to visit and learn more about his local leisure facilities as one of his cooperative goals. This led to us discussing the possibility of visiting all the students’ local communities. Lorraine asked the students whether they thought this was a good idea, to which they responded enthusiastically. As their main tutor, she stated that the group could arrange visits to local student areas, starting with Frank, Shaffia and then Kavita (as they were leaving at the end of the academic year). We concluded that each student could show everyone else around where they lived and that the group could find out more about what local amenities were available.

It was evident from this dialogue that although learning independent skills and accessing the community surrounding the college was useful, the students were eager to access their own local communities and establish links. Lorraine obviously agreed, as she was eager to timetable these excursions, perhaps seeing these visits as opportunities for students to lead and learn from each other. The issue of accessing local communities emerged again during this same meeting, when Shaffia expounded upon her own learning preference findings following Frank. She asserted, in relation to the photo voice questions where do you like to learn and what do you enjoy learning, that she liked ‘going out’ (see Picture 6.2). This was depicted in the following picture of the bus stop outside of college on the main road:
Outside...I like it at the bus stop yeah? Where we go on the bus, take a ticket and then go sit on the bus.

It seemed that this was about more than just leaving the college for a day trip, but represented doing things that other people did and learning these essential life skills. Shaffia may have felt part of the community when accessing these local facilities and showing her independence.

**Providing employment opportunities**

Drawing upon their reflexive skills (as we were confined to the college), student co-researchers were invited to capture pictorial responses in relation to their ‘aspirations for the future’ (7th - 8th May 2009). Most of these aspirations centred on jobs that they wanted to do after they left college. When considering how these aspirations might be realised they were asked: *How can the college help you to achieve this?* Lee advocated his views (see Picture 6.3):
Lee explained that he wanted to work in an airport as a baggage handler. He felt that Lorraine could organise trips to the nearby airport and that she could write a letter of recommendation. Thinking about how we could capture this, Lee decided that he and Frank should be in the frame, and wanted to show Frank (as friendly support) helping him. Frank suggested that he sign the ‘help’ symbol, to illustrate that Lee was asking for practitioner help/support. As requested by Lee, I took this picture.

Following Lee, Frank contemplated how practitioners could support him to work in catering (see Picture 6.4):
Like, like if, a member of staff [Me: Er hum] come with me to help me in the canteen [Me: Yeah] I could probably do it.

Me: Right, what like erm, a member of staff, by that you mean what like Tracey, Claudine or Lorraine, or do you mean a member of staff who’s already working [Frank: Like] here?

Frank: Like a member of staff, who’s already working here.

Me: Right.

Frank: You know, to guide me.

With this response, it seemed Frank thought beyond the specialist programme that he was currently on, and for that matter the specialist staff assigned to support him. He felt that people already working in a favourable environment would give him all the support that he needed to do this job. As he came to this conclusion, he asked canteen staff whether he could take a picture of them.
James was next to respond to the questions, but stated that he did not want to use the camera to capture these responses, preferring to just answer the questions instead. He explained that he wanted to work in a cinema and felt that the college could support him by planning regular trips to the local cinema (nearby to the college), where he could learn from staff working there. I suggested to him that it might be more beneficial to visit his local cinema, where the group could help introduce James to this work experience. Frank and Lee added that James would need practice at this and that cinema staff could help him. Kavita was next to share her views (see Picture 6.5):

![Picture 6.5 Kavita: support from librarians](image)

She expressed an interest to work with young children, as a child minder, or be a librarian. Whilst thinking about how the college could continue to help her with this (as she was already doing work experience in the college library), Frank interjected:

*Lorraine can help you, or you could ask library staff.*

Kavita agreed with Frank’s observations and confirmed that the college librarians were very helpful and friendly. However, as with Frank’s earlier response to this question, it seemed that these women
represented librarians as a whole, as he may have been encouraging Kavita to ask for support in her local library.

Shaffia followed by stating that practitioners could help her by exploring more work experience opportunities outside of college as she, like Kavita, was doing work experience in the library. She explained that she wanted to work in a bakery or factory (anywhere that made baked products; see Picture 6.6). In response, I asked her:

*How could the college help you?*

*Shaffia: Taxi or a bus.*

*Me: What helping you to learn how to do that?*

*Shaffia: Yeah.*

*Me: To travel independently?*
With this, Shaffia led us out of college to the roadside, where there was a factory down the road from us, and where she took this picture. Although capturing the factory, it seemed that independent travel was something more pressing to Shaffia; an issue that was returned to during the following question (which was mentioned in Chapter 5 under the subheading: ‘Identifying educational barriers’).

From these responses, it seemed that the students were asking practitioners to provide not only a breadth of employment opportunities, but to extend these beyond the remit of the college. They inferred that practitioners needed to support them in making connections, which would imply that relationships between college and local communities would already need to be established. Perhaps, practitioners could also collaborate with supported employment agencies at the beginning of term and throughout the academic year, rather than addressing this nearer to the end of year. During his final interview Lee mentioned that he perceived the inquiry as a useful means at getting practitioners and his family to listen to what he had to say. He felt that the end of year student presentations (June 2009) would play a pivotal role in this, as it would bring everyone concerned together to listen and to discuss possible ways forward. This would suggest that practitioners could organise annual presentations, where these issues could be openly discussed with further transition goals agreed.

What was also interesting from this feedback was the perceived practitioner role that Frank envisioned. To him this was not a ‘specialist role’, but rather an ‘intermediary role’, where practitioners could build links between the college and the student’s local community. Perhaps this role would be similar in orientation to my prescribed facilitatory role and that of supportive researchers, but more specific to an educational context.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter co-researcher responses are presented, identifying central themes that arose from their experiences of being involved in this cooperative inquiry. From this, it seemed portfolios, photo voice, body collages and creating and presenting a poster were accessible means for students to voice their learning preferences. The poster was also felt to aid students in collective empowerment, as they shared their views with the research community. The students commented that specific researcher responsibilities enabled them to assert their skills and authority, as they performed similar
roles to practitioners. Moreover, students felt that practitioners perceived them as adults and made time to actively listen to their views. However, reflective journals and meetings, with too much emphasis on academic subject matter, were felt to be inaccessible. Practitioners also expressed concerns about portfolios, as they were anxious that their influences were affecting student choices and the authenticity of artifacts collected. When asked about their own reflective journals, pertaining to how they could support students, practitioners reported that these were too impractical to maintain. As such, I turned to student data about how they perceived these supportive roles. Students expressed that they wanted practitioners to help them make connections with their local communities and provide more employment opportunities.

Although practitioners acknowledged that there were aspects of the inquiry that encouraged them to re-evaluate their positions, these discussions were limited and needed further investigation. In the following chapter I interview practitioners to ascertain their views about supportive roles and lessons learnt from this cooperative endeavour.
CHAPTER 7. An Inclusive turn: practitioner reflections

In this chapter I focus on the importance of being reflexive whilst engaging in cooperative inquiry and the need to appraise courses of action. Indeed, as the previous chapter revealed, practitioner reflective journals were too difficult to maintain, leaving them with no reflective space in which to analyse collaborative processes and their supportive roles. As I explored this further and my own research agenda, I came to look at my practitioner colleagues in new ways. In particular, I realised that if proposed ways of working were to become embedded practices that valued diverse learner contributions, I would need to facilitate further reflective dialogue. Four months after the inquiry had officially ended (June 2009), I returned to the college to conduct three informal interviews with practitioners. The findings from this line of inquiry led me to identify some indicators of a change of perspective amongst practitioners that I had not anticipated. As the chapter unfolds I trace and explain the development of this new thinking, drawing on various data sources, not least my own reflective journal.

I begin by drawing upon my own reflections and how this prompted me to return to the college. I then present the interview findings, which comprise of three separate accounts (two single interviews and a focus group discussion). Although I initially applied direct interpretations to learn more about practitioner perceptions of support, I found myself reappraising this analysis and approaching it again through two additional sub-questions: ‘What were the main factors in changing practitioner attitudes and perceptions of the students?’ and ‘how did these influence their views of their supportive roles?’ I expound upon this further analysis, before comparing these factors against alternative explanations.

Reflexivity and the need to rethink

I draw upon my own reflections to demonstrate how I inadvertently overlooked practitioner voices, by focusing most of my attention on student participation. With practitioners admitting that they had abandoned their journals (see previous chapter), I realised I had no data to retrieve and would be left with limited practitioner data. The following self-reflective analysis allowed me to re-evaluate these circumstances and think about how I might create alternative avenues for practitioners to share their insights.
I think I started this process with a more political head on my shoulders rather than that of an inquisitive researcher, as I approached this with an attitude to change the learning environment and liberate student voices. Being somewhat detached from the college now, I am now able to see that I had a predetermined attitude.

What is becoming clear is practitioners need to have a greater voice in this inquiry. I think we would lose the momentum of what we have been trying to explore if we/I don’t consult with them. I need to know, what do they really think about the inquiry? I want to understand their perspectives. The reflective journals have evidently not worked, so how and when do they communicate their reflections and how can we/I access these to inform this research?

I am wondering whether it might be a good idea to conduct a focus group discussion with them, where we can openly talk about the research. I think as a practitioner myself trying to gauge the opinions of other practitioners, I have to put aside the principles of inclusive research for a moment and interview them by myself without student co-researchers. Although tinged with guilt, I feel I can justify this by arguing that this has nothing to do with power relationships and status, but rather more to do with teaching/supporting identities. For example, during lunch breaks students often sit amongst themselves whereas practitioners commune with each other on a separate table; a clear division here. So for the sake of obtaining authentic feedback I need to do this on my own (written on the 8th September 2009).

As I noted, by being political in my endeavors to challenge the learning context I had underestimated how vital their contributions were to cultivating an inclusive learning environment. This was only realised when I noticed that practitioners were voicing their reflections, informally, during a preparatory meeting, where we were getting ready to present our work at a conference. Without giving practitioners spaces in which to reflect upon their experiences of this cooperative way of working, findings would have been extremely restricted. Wanting to understand more about their perceived supportive roles, I realised that I would need to delve deeper. Being a practitioner myself meant that I had the same contextual insights and responsibilities as them, and, for these reasons, I thought they might be more receptive and open about their experiences of the inquiry with me, rather than with the students.
Listening to the voices of practitioners

I arranged a focus group interview with my practitioner colleagues (23rd October 2009) two days after we (as a cooperative) had taught a participatory photography session to a group of undergraduate students. The previous week we had also presented our work at a research forum. I thought that this would be an ideal time in which to engage in a reflective discussion, as the research would be fresh in their minds. Also, the recent presentations might open up a dialogue in which to recollect, making it feel less like an interview and more like a shared experience that we were informally reflecting upon. It was agreed that I would come in early on the Friday morning, before the students arrived, to hold this discussion, as my colleagues felt this was the most appropriate time for them (being the least busiest day of the week).

I had initially intended to hold this discussion with all four of the practitioners together, but circumstances on the day permitted this from happening. Instead, I ended up with findings from three separate discussions. The first of these begins with Tracey, an informal one to one chat we had while we waited for our other colleagues to arrive. Once Lorraine and Mark arrived I then conducted our planned focus group discussion. Unfortunately, Claudine was absent from this, arriving late, so I held another informal discussion with her shortly after.

The following conversational interviews were recorded and segments of the transcripts analysed through applying ‘direct interpretations’ from case study analysis (influenced by Stake, 1995). In taking what I saw as an ‘inclusive turn’, “[which] involves those within a particular context in working together to address barriers to education experienced by some learners” (Ainscow, 2007b, p. 3), it was essential that I recognised how practitioners felt they supported the students and whether there were any noticeable changes to their support, due to cooperative processes. If they felt changes had occurred, I needed to identify those changes and draw them out to suggest possible implications for future practices.

Informal interview with Tracey

Upon arrival at the classroom I was greeted by Tracey, who was busy working on the computer and printing off pictures of the students engaged in activities from the day before. While we waited for our
other colleagues to arrive, Tracey started talking to me about what she felt she had learnt from doing the research, commenting:

*I've learnt more doing the research, erm about intelligences and that, and that they're not just disabled [Me: Er hum] I do look at things different now [Me: Right] with them and think well they are capable of doing that, you don't just “oh no they can't do it sort of thing”. Do you understand what I mean?*

Tracey opened the conversation by drawing connections between intelligences and ability and stating that she felt the students were not disabled. She then moved on to talk about how she sees things differently now, understanding the students to be capable individuals. From this response, I sensed what seemed to be a change in her attitude towards the students, a response that I was eager to pursue further:

*Right, so in terms of how you perceive them [Tracey: Yeah, yeah] has changed?*

*Tracey: I do look at them different, yeah, [Me: Hum] and I don't do as much for them now.*

By looking at the students differently, this had, she believed, led her to re-evaluate the support that she had previously given and to provide a different kind of assistance. She continued:

*We did that study didn't we [Me: Er hum] I think well, if you do everything for them they're not gonna do anything are they?*

I saw this as an insightful statement that showed that she had carefully thought about her practice and realised that maybe she was doing too much for the students. This raised an interesting point about how practitioners, albeit well intentioned, may be acting as barriers to learning, preventing students from acquiring independent skills. Tracey continued:

*But...as the research goes, I think it has helped, I think it’s helped us a lot [Me: Er hum] to understand the students more really. To erm,...I don't know as a, as an equal. Look at them more as an equal now not as someone with a disability.*

She felt that the inquiry had helped her understand the students, but I was interested to know in what respect. Tracey stated that she saw them as an equal, perhaps seeing the person, before their purported disability. This inferred that by removing disablist perceptions and preconceived ideas
about their learning capabilities this had enabled her to see the students as ‘students’, rather than ‘learning disabled students’ and made her question how she could support them. She went on to say:

*Because, before that “oh they’ve got learning disabilities [Me: Er hum] do this, that and” it’s not like that for me now, since I’ve done this [Me: Er hum]. I think well they are intelligent, it’s just that you’ve got to give them time and chance, haven’t ya? That’s how I’ve found it, the research, yeah.*

Here, she admitted that before the inquiry she focused upon student deficits which made her instinctively step in and do things for them. However, thinking about the notion of intelligence differently and how the students possessed intelligences, had, it seemed, encouraged her to review these assumptions. Consequently, she felt that ‘time and chance’ were the main supports she could offer the students. I asked her to elaborate, drawing upon examples, about how her new found thinking had been implemented into her supportive practice and what changes she felt had arisen:

*Tracey: Probably Lee for instance. I know he’s come on, because we’ve had him for two years, but since we’ve been doing this research I think he’s grown up a lot [Me: Hum] It’s like...I feel as though he’s on the same level as us [Me: Right] do you understand what I mean? [Me: Yeah] and like you can have a conversation with Lee, just give him time and [Me: Hum], but as before you’d probably speak for him, yeah.*

*Me: Yeah*

*Tracey: And it’s, like you can have a conversation with Lee now can’t ya [Me: Hum]? You could probably go to the pub with him [Me: Yeah, that’s] whereas before I wouldn’t think of things like that [Me: Hum, hum] or you could have a night out with Lee, I wouldn’t have thought all that before [Me: Hum], it’s weird, it’s strange. Hum.*

By giving Lee ‘time and chance’, Tracey observed that he communicated for himself and engaged in discussions. Being actively involved and having his opinions sought gave Lee a valued identity, where she considered him as ‘one of them’. Being ‘one of them’ he had a social identity, meaning the rite of passage to engage in social activities, as Tracey mentioned going to the pub and having a night out. It seemed that he was now regarded as a consultant of his own learning. As such, by giving Lee time and chance to reflect and communicate his learning preferences he is seen as the solution
to the problem, rather than the problem itself. He is now working alongside practitioners, as his voice
is recognised and valued, as opposed to being the object of concern.

The conversation then moved on to group humour and Lee’s researcher role:

*Tracey:* I think that’s what’s done it in the research, him doing the photography [Me: Hum] Erm, he’s
took them on himself, hasn’t he? [Me: Hum] And it’s made him, I think he’s grown up a lot [Me: Hum].
I know he’s still a bit immature, sorry about that, but he has grown up a lot.

I think this segment raises two interesting points: firstly the value of a role, like that of a practitioner,
and, secondly, the independent skills involved in carrying out that specific role i.e. Lee using the
camera confidently and not needing practitioner assistance. From these insights it seemed that Lee
was more than capable of doing things for himself. Scrutinising her statement about Lee growing up,
I question has he really grown up as a result of his role, or was this more about him being given time
and chance in which to perform this role and exhibit skills? In which case, is this more an indication of
her own development and growth?

Tracey also reflected upon this last point:

*And, I look at that now and think well it’s probably not immature someway, as, as his impairments [Me: Hum], but not his disability, because [Me: Hum] he’s not disabled is he? That’s what we’re looking at really [Me: Yeah], that’s what’s made me look different now [Me: Hum] the research at that [Me: Er hum] Because you do a l, even though I’ve worked here ten years you do label the stu, well I did do with the students thinking “oh well they’re disabled and”. But now I don’t look at it like that, it’s weird.*

Carrying on with this same line of thought, about roles and the ability to contribute, Tracey observed
that providing an enabling learning environment goes far beyond just giving the students more
opportunities in which to participate, but entails practitioners looking critically at their own
assumptions. It was at this point that I began to wonder what specifically had made her look
differently, what were the main factors to challenge her epistemologies? She admitted that before she
would label the students and had been doing so for ten years (maybe without even realising it). In the
light of these revelations, I asked how she perceived the students now, especially students that had
just started the course:
Yeah, I’ve probably looked at them more at erm, like you did, the intelligence, intelligence theory, things that they like and that they’re good at [Me: Er hum] and like Jamie’s very good at computers and I tend to like focus on that, let him go on the computer, because he loves that and he’s good at it [Me: Yeah] But as before we probably wouldn’t have done that [Me: Right], because of the research, that’s why we would do that, we’re looking at what he is intelligent at [Me: Hum] Do you know what I mean?

Tracey claimed she views the students as learners with intelligences and is eager to learn about their diverse profiles, particularly drawing upon their strengths. She even explained how she has already been (with the academic year only just starting) observing Jamie’s (a new student) strengths; these being exhibited on the computer. She seemed confident with her new found beliefs, to the extent of justifying her actions to others, as she stated:

*We say to Lorraine, well if they’re good at it, like Hannah’s research, let him, let him stick with that sort of thing....*

*It could take him somewhere, he could get a good job in that. He’s better than us.*

Coming back to Jamie’s computer skills, Tracey has begun to see possibilities beyond the college and how he could progress these skills to obtain employment. She then went one step further by stating “He’s better than us”, inferring Jamie’s skills are even more advanced than theirs as practitioners.

**Informal group interview**

Tracey and I were still conversing when our other colleagues arrived. We finished our conversation and waited for Mark and Lorraine to get themselves ready to conduct the focus group discussion. I opened this by asking them what they felt they had learnt from their cooperative experience, in relation to the students, and whether they felt anything had informed their practice. As I had anticipated, they began by reflecting upon the participatory photography session that we had just taught, and discussed the beneficial and challenging aspects associated with presenting at the university. This exchange then moved on to focus upon the inquiry process. Throughout this exchange I let my colleagues direct the dialogue, only interjecting to ask further questions, as I did not want to manipulate their responses. Mark opened this dialogue by sharing some of his insights:
Well, well to go back really to, to the day I first walked in here [Tracey: Hum] and first met the students, erm I think that, and I’ve seen in them a growing confidence [Tracey: Hum] definitely [Tracey: Through the the research?] I mean that’s comparable, [Tracey: Cos of the research? I’ve said the same] you could say...Yeah.

He returned to his earlier point further on in the discussion:

And er, I think that erm, that’s one side, the student aspect, they can, they feel, I think feel as though, particularly one or two of them [Tracey: They’re equal] they, yeah [Tracey: That’s what I said] They can stand up [Tracey: Yeah] and say what [Lorraine: Hum] they have to say or want to say.

Mark observed that the students had become more confident, which he believed enabled them to stand up for themselves. From this, it appeared students had become more vocal in their expressions, voicing their opinions, both when specifically being asked and contributing to discussions as and when they wanted to. What was also interesting about Mark’s comments was how he corrected himself when stating, “they can, I think feel as though...” He went from a preconceived thought to one of speculation; perhaps because the students are more autonomous, he felt he can no longer speak for them.

I started to question what, specifically, did practitioners believe was building student self-confidence. But before I could pose this question to them, Lorraine exclaimed:

And it’s valued

Lorraine’s comment provided possible insight here, as students could be feeling more valued. They may have felt that their contributions are beginning to matter and that practitioners are taking their views seriously. This may also reflect Lorraine’s opinions about student self-advocacy, being valuable insights for her own practice.

Mark returned to his original point:

So that’s that part, from the other side, from my perspective having not known them before this, it’s been an absolutely fantastic tool for me to learn about them individually [Tracey: Hum] you know, just to take the information that’s in the journals and in the [Lorraine: Hum], in the folders and this sort of poster arrangement as well I think has been really good.
Mark explained that he was able to learn about the students individually and applied the information he obtained directly into how he supported them. As with Tracey’s earlier reflections, this suggested that the practitioners saw the students as consultants of their own learning and processes we explored together as means in which to engage with them.

Tracey: I said the same sort of thing. I said I do, I’ve worked here ten years, but it’s made me look at them different, like their intelligences and what they are good at.

Mark: That’s just the point I want to make.

Tracey: Yeah.

Lorraine: Yeah [Mark: yeah], yeah you’re right yeah.

Tracey: Definitely, like Jamie’s very good with the computer isn’t he? [Lorraine: Yeah] So, we’re pushing that, because I was saying we know he’s really good [Lorraine: Yeah] at it.

Lorraine: Yeah, yeah.

Tracey: As before the research, we probably wouldn’t have looked at that would we?

Lorraine: Yeah.

Mark: Well I didn’t have any concept of different intelligences [Tracey: No, it’s made you think different, yeah] before this, and it has [Lorraine: Yeah] now made me think about [Me: Er hum].

Lorraine: Yeah, yeah.

Tracey: Hum.

Lorraine: About how people are.

Mark: About us and everybody else I suppose.

Tracey: Yeah, it does [Lorraine: Yeah] it has definitely done that.

Lorraine: And the different skills that they’re really good at [Tracey and Mark: Yeah] and that we focus on those ones and not focus on the things they found difficult.

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Here, Tracey reiterated her earlier impressions of the research and stated that her perceptions of the students had been challenged. She used intelligences as an example, explaining how this idea has encouraged her to focus upon the students’ strengths rather than their deficits. Both Mark and Lorraine agreed that the concept of MI has made them rethink, not just about the immediate students they work with, but about learning diversity in general. Lorraine asserted that student skills should be at the forefront of their practice. Perhaps, there has been no reason, prior to this inquiry, for practitioners to explore student strengths or how raised awareness of these skills might benefit supportive provision. It would seem that perceiving the students as anything other than learning disabled, possessing low intelligence, has not been of paramount importance before. Rather, they have been more concerned with getting the students through the course and providing appropriate support for their impairments. If student strengths had been identified before, this would have been incidental, noted and not always followed up upon, but never used to prompt practitioner critical reflection. Lorraine continued with her assertions:

*Because I think that’s what [Tracey: That’s it, hum] happened isn’t it? What are they’re, they’re, sort of, you look at their profile and you think “oh well I’ve got judgments about what [Mark: Yeah] they can do and what they can’t do”.*

Lorraine pointed out that often judgements are made about students, not through interacting with them, but from reading their personal profiles. Here, I feel, the power imbalance becomes immediately apparent, as practitioners are in a heightened position to make preconceived assumptions and form opinions about students before even interacting with them. These profiles are often read to inform teaching and pastoral care, gaining information readily to set about creating session plans, schemes of work and levels of support. Even before the academic year has started, predetermined ideas about student capabilities have already started to form, based upon what has been, I hasten to add subjectively, written and read. This made me wonder, how many other FE students, without the learning difficulty/disability label, are scrutinised to this degree and this before even registering for a course? Given practitioner reactions to the inquiry thus far, I began to wonder what their impressions of student profiles were now. And, indeed, whether they still felt they served to inform their practice. For example:

*Lorraine: You hold back your judgement [Tracey: Yeah] until you’ve seen the whole [Mark: Yeah] person a bit more [Tracey: Yeah, yeah] and got to know them.*
Tracey: Yeah, that’s true, yeah.

Lorraine: Yeah.

Mark: Well, it, it rolls on doesn’t it?

Lorraine and Tracey: Hum.

Mark: And has a knock on effect, because now we’re thinking about what they’re gonna do when they leave us?

Lorraine: Yeah.

Mark: Well based on what we’ve learnt, partially through your [Me: Er hum] research [Lorraine: Hum] it’s gave, it’s given us an insight into what their strengths are [Tracey: Yeah, definitely] and what they’re weaknesses are, hasn’t it?

Lorraine stated that she is now eager to hold back judgement about what she reads and is eager to see the “whole person”. This would suggest that student profiles have become recognised as a potentially dangerous alternative by which to get to know a student and have, rather ironically, prevented a complete, holistic understanding about them from forming. Practitioners, aware of the how these preconceived ideas have influenced their practice, asserted that by seeing the whole student, they have been able to gain insight and be more progressive in their thinking. Instead of supporting the students whilst they are attending college, support has begun to mean helping them develop transferable skills for future plans beyond college. So, as well as questioning existing assumptions, at various points, Lorraine mentioned that there is a need to listen:

I think also listening, to, taking that time to listen and, erm you know, it’s all very well, you know saying “we’ve gotta do this, we’ve gotta [Tracey: Hum] do the other, tick all these boxes”.

She continued:

It takes quite a long time for someone to become more confident.

Further on in the conversation and reflecting upon her role, Lorraine stated:
And because we’ve been more, we are more sensitive to it, I mean look at someone like Jamie, who’s just joined us.

She went on to acknowledge that curriculum objectives and pastoral duties often prevent practitioners from having the time to listen. It would appear that such responsibilities, intended to serve the interests of the students, have acted instead as barriers to their autonomy.

Lorraine asserted that it normally takes time for students to become more confident; which seems hardly surprising given the fact that practitioners are preoccupied with other demands. However, by making connections between ‘being listened to’ and ‘becoming more confident’, practitioners seemed more willing to set aside time in which to engage with the students, believing this to be a fundamental investment of time. Lorraine explained how being “more sensitive” to the students’ views has already enabled practitioners to understand them better, drawing upon Jamie as an example.

The group went on to reflect upon their experiences of the different methods employed and to share some of their thoughts:

Lorraine: Doing the body collages [Tracey: Yeah, definitely] and things like that, hum. So, it’s some, they take ownership of it when it’s their own body isn’t it I think?

Mark: Yeah.

Tracey: Yeah, I think that [Mark: It’s a personal thing isn’t it?] should be used all the time [Lorraine: Yeah], every time a [Lorraine: I mean] new student comes in I think the body collage [Me: Er hum] should definitely be used, yeah.

The body collage method was mentioned as an effective way of getting to know the students. I found the statement “they take ownership of it when it’s their own body” quite insightful, as the practitioners believed that the students can not only be self-reflective, but that their chosen images are authentic representations of them as learners. It also reiterated how personal this approach is for students, as there are no right or wrong answers and no one to speak for them, as it relies upon their own interpretations. Practitioners felt that it would be a useful tool during the induction process, a way in and a means in which to initiate discussion about new students.
As the discussion moved on they talked about ways in which they would like to adapt the body collage method, instead of the students drawing around each other lying down; they suggested that this could be achieved by the students standing up against the wall. They felt that this would be easier and far less intrusive. I thought this quite significant, as it showed how practitioners were thinking beyond the research to the utility of the activity in everyday practice, and taking ownership of how it could be developed further:

Mark, although eager to continue listening to student views, appeared to be sceptical about the longevity of the cooperative approach:

Because er [Lorraine: I agree with you, yeah] because what’s gonna happen, I fear, when you start doing the new examinations you’re gonna be so obsessed with that over the next year.

Lorraine: We’re not [Tracey: The NVQ? We’re not] Mark, I can tell you Mark, we are not!

(Everyone laughs)

Lorraine: We’re not, that’s not going to lead the way this goes, it’s got to be led from the student. It’s got [Tracey: Definitely] to be student led. I mean we’ve just gotta get on [Tracey: I know we’re doing it, we’re just trying to get it organised aren’t we, but?] with the paperwork. And tick box, it’s a tick box thing isn’t it?

Tracey: Er hum.

Mark: It is, yeah.

Lorraine: It’s elements, we’ve just, so that they get a certificate at the end [Me: Er hum], really. But, it’s to satisfy the college, academic.

This dialogue was revealing, as Mark begun to think about the feasibility of cooperative processes, as he questioned whether the new NVQ initiative would distract them away from lessons learnt. The discussion then moved on to look at other, rather unexpected, outcomes of the inquiry. For example:

Tracey: It’s made me more confident. I don’t bother now who, I go into a room full of people [Mark: That’s great, yeah] it doesn’t bother me at all.
Interestingly, Tracey mentioned how confident she felt she had become as a result of the presentations we did outside of the college. Her remarks reminded me of how essential it was to capture practitioner views, illustrating the impact of the inquiry in many different ways. I question whether her increased self-assurance will have a knock on effect, perhaps in encouraging her to be more exploratory and trusting past experiences to inform her current supportive role. This led me to think about practitioner discretion and how often they are allowed to rely upon their own experiences, a skill set which I believe is often undervalued. As practitioners reflected upon other methods explored, they mentioned how they have been using photo voice:

*Mark:* We very rarely get a hold of the camera now.

*Tracey:* No.

*Lorraine:* Yeah, and where [Mark: Very rarely] where, I think what, what we’re, Jamie used it all yesterday really [Tracey: Yeah, yeah] didn’t he? He took charge of it.

*Tracey:* And came back and did them on there (pointing to the computer).

*Lorraine:* And he came back and downloaded, but Lee’s done it, one day. I almost think [Tracey: And then we had a slide show] we ought to have one per day.

*Tracey:* What he set up [Lorraine: Yeah] Jamie and I thought “God!!”

*Lorraine:* But you see what, what Jamie, Jamie’s taking the lead, but why don’t we get each student to do that? Take their own photographs [Tracey: Er hum] and download them there you know.

Photo voice seemed to have evolved from posing questions to the students and asking them to capture pictures, to each student having their own collection of pictures to refer to. It would appear that students are both taking the pictures and having pictures taken of them whilst engaged in different activities. Practitioners are using these images to encourage students to reflect upon what is conveyed, leading to dialogue e.g. a discussion about newly acquired skills. What is also interesting about these developments is that there does not seem to be any resistance from practitioners about students taking control of the cameras; in fact, they seemed to be embracing the shift in power. Perhaps, as Tracey’s astonishment about Jamie reveals, it allowed them to see what the students were capable of doing.
Lorraine, being eager to pursue this further, wanted every student to take the lead, learning the necessary skills to take pictures and then download these onto the computer and print them off. Photo voice, in this respect, has come to mean far more than just ‘reading the pictures’ and striving to make changes to the learning environment; it has come to mean the process of engagement itself. In essence, photo voice is a medium for the students to communicate learning experiences, as and when they want. Practitioners then moved from talking about students taking pictures to them collecting images for their portfolios:

*Tracey: And then we got to know them a bit more then, cos we knew, like Lee wanted that picture of me and Shaffa working didn’t he? [Lorraine: Yes] Cos, he liked to see us working (Tracey and I laugh) So it explained a lot.*

*Lorraine: That tells us a lot about him.*

*Tracey: Yeah, [Me: Hum] that’s what I mean [Lorraine: Well, (she laughs) he likes to watch others work] yeah, it tells a lot about Lee, I’m like that (pulling a facial expression of astonishment and laughing).*

*Lorraine: It, it does help, particularly.*

*Tracey: As before we wouldn’t have done that, would we, so we wouldn’t have found out that [Lorraine: Yeah] about Lee.*

Further on in this discussion Mark commented:

*You can see a pattern emerging, from, for them all through the pictures, can’t ya?*

Mark pointed out that patterns began to emerge that helped them build up impressions of the students; these emerging not from practitioner observations and interpretations, but from images that had been chosen by the students. As the dialogue evolved, I commented that the students needed to be presented with opportunities to enable them to explore, to which Lorraine agreed:

*But, it’s almost like you need to give them that experience [Tracey: Hum] don’t you to.*

Further on, Tracey also comments:

*To see it [Me: Hum] They’ve got to see it, haven’t they?*
I found this exchange particularly significant for two reasons: firstly, it suggested how critically reflective practitioners had become about changing current practices; and, secondly, what they believed their roles should be in supporting the students. They seemed to be more open about allowing students the opportunity to explore different experiences. Perhaps the combination of student autonomy, self-reflective skills and holding back judgement had led practitioners to these conclusions.

Aware of the fact that the practitioners found the reflective journals challenging, I wanted to probe further into why this was so, and to gauge their perceptions about practitioner reflection more generally:

*Tracey: Yeah, I struggled with that Hannah actually, the, the journal.*

Tracey and Lorraine elaborated further:

*Tracey: It was, I suppose having the time to, to sit down and do it [Me: Hum] and when you got home and if they were left here you forgot about them, and then you’d miss two or three days and then.*

*Lorraine: And, because we’re so busy with the students [Tracey: Yeah, it went out the window didn’t it] our priorities that, yeah. I think you recording us...actually.*

The journals were evidently too time-consuming, becoming in the end more of a hindrance than an aid. However, they were all in agreement about the need for reflection and suggested that informal discussions together in the mornings would be more conducive to their work demands (they even suggested that these could be audio recorded). What was apparent as this discussion progressed was that any proposed reforms would need to be incorporated and embedded into an already existing culture. In other words, consideration needed to be given regarding what forms of reflective practice are feasible within the context in which they work.

The group went on to discuss a recent visit to the airport, in order to illustrate how they had begun to think differently about the accessibility of public facilities/services:

*Lorraine: You realise how, how debilitating [Tracey: Hum, people are] things can be, but we actually [Tracey: Some people, society isn’t it?] got a lot of support yesterday, didn’t we? [Tracey: Yeah it was good actually] And we thought the airport, what did we think of the airport, I mean?*
What was evident from this statement was how practitioners were becoming more aware of disabling extrinsic factors, rather than focusing upon student deficits. It seemed that they were taking the lessons they had learnt from doing the inquiry, particularly those of challenging social constructs, outside into the local community. I then asked practitioners how they felt about working collectively with the students:

*Mark:* I wasn’t sure where you were going and what you were doing [Me: Er hum], personally.

Eager to understand more about Mark’s initial concerns and the position he adopted towards the approach, I probed further:

*Me:* What, standing back a bit?

*Mark:* Yeah, just to stand back [Tracey: Hum] a bit [Me: A bit guarded], this is just another university project, you know [Me: Er hum], Hannah’s doing, with respect. Hannah’s doing [Me: Yeah, yeah] her PhD and [Tracey: Yeah], and where’s this gonna lead? And how beneficial is this going to be for the students, which, I think was my first concern.

Further on Mark elaborated:

*Can I really make, make a contribution to this [Me: Er hum], personally? Erm, but I think as time wore, wore on, went on erm, I became more relaxed, because I was more aware of what, what was [Tracey: Hum] happening [Tracey and Lorraine: Hum] and the way it was affecting our students and I could see that it was, it was very beneficial [Tracey: Hum] [Me: Er hum] erm.*

I found Mark’s candidness about his initial concerns extremely revealing, as it is natural for participants to be dubious about whose interests are really being served when undertaking research; even more so, when wanting to include marginalised young people and professing to use an inclusive approach. Perhaps my colleagues were worried that I would take advantage of my own practitioner role i.e. carrying out an inquiry that would distract everyone involved and not really amount to anything.

Although it was Mark who expressed these initial apprehensions, Lorraine and Tracey, through their reactions to his remarks, evidently felt the same way. What is interesting about my colleagues’ honesty here is how they did not want to praise the cooperative process simply to pacify me, but
instead wanted to give genuine feedback about their impressions and experiences; making this a more credible account. It also suggested that the inquiry process, intending to be open, seeking joint ownership achieved its aims, to some extent at least, as practitioners felt they could be direct. Moreover, what may have felt like an obligation to begin with evolved into them having their own stake in the project. Perhaps, as Mark pointed out, they found the ‘tools of engagement’ beneficial to the students which in turn served to help their practice rather than hamper it. In this sense, practitioners became more engaged not through compliance and/or manipulation, but rather through their own first hand experiences.

Mark’s comment, “can I really make a contribution to this”, seemed to confirm my earlier observations about how I had grossly underestimated the roles that practitioners would play in this. This is a clear indication that they were initially confused about their responsibilities. Although they were eager to contribute, they were unsure as to how.

They continued to talk about the implications of working reflectively with students:

*Mark*: Come back and talk about these things and.

*Lorraine*: Giving the students the choice, to choose.

Further into the discussion, Lorraine continued to explain:

*But that’s not, not really your project, but [Me: Hum], but you give them an experience, you take them to tourist information [Mark: Yeah] you take them somewhere, you say “well what do you think?” Come back, let’s have a talk, what did work, what didn’t work? Like you’re saying [Me: Er hum, er hum].*

*Tracey*: Hum.


*Mark*: When we [Me: Yeah] go out and come back.

*Lorraine*: Yeah, what worked, what didn’t work.
It was mutually agreed that the reflective meetings, although informative, were too long and agenda driven, all of which I acknowledge. However, practitioners were eager to continue using reflective discussions as part of their practice and have since adapted the formal meetings to make them into reflective sessions. These now entail asking the students to think critically about an activity that they have just been doing and to encourage them to feed back their thoughts about this; essentially, what they feel worked well and what did not work so well. Although the means in which to practise self-reflective skills was abandoned, in favour of another approach, it is, I feel, the attitudes of practitioners towards the students and their ability to contribute to their own learning that is of most significant here. It would appear that students have become valuable educational consultants.

Sensing that there has been a shift in practitioner thinking, I asked them directly whether what I saw as their (disablist) perceptions of the students had changed as a result of the inquiry, to which they responded:

*Lorraine: Endeavour not to be clouded by things you’ve read and [Tracey and Mark: Yeah] cos you read things about them.*

*Tracey: Probably not do as much for them, I said, because I know that they are capable [Mark: Exactly], they’re not as disabled as [Mark: Yeah] we [Lorraine: Standing back] think [Mark: Yeah] they was before, yeah.*

*Lorraine: And just seeing what, what [Tracey: Yeah] can they do.*

Lorraine continues:

*Rather than what, what [Tracey: That’s made me think] [Mark: That’s a very good point] we think they can do.*

She explained that they are becoming more critically observant:

*And we’re sort of thinking again, again and again, like we’ve been to the airport and that student has shown an interest [Tracey: Hum] you see little things coming out.*

*Tracey: Yeah.*
Lorraine: You think now hold on a minute [Tracey: As we probably wouldn’t have looked at that before would we?] have I prejudged?

Mark summed up their new found thinking with the following question:

You see the question really as, what can they do?

This revealing exchange suggested that practitioners were actively looking at and identifying student strengths, rather than focusing upon deficits. They were even trying to prevent themselves from being, what Lorraine described as, ‘clouded’ by things that they had read and making predetermined judgements. It also demonstrated the mental tug of war that they may be having with themselves, as it would be all too easy for them to re-assume control and make decisions on behalf of the students. In this sense, they are keen for the students to continue to make decisions for themselves. Perhaps their prospective reflective meetings will give them the space to regulate their support and critically question whether they are doing too much and making too many assumptions. What is evident is the need for spaces, pauses and interruptions that will allow practitioners to reflect upon what has been observed and how to go about offering appropriate levels support.

Informal interview with Claudine

Unfortunately, Claudine was running late (due to car problems) and so was unable to attend the focus group discussion. She arrived just after the students did and seemed rather flustered by all the earlier commotion that she had experienced. Although, eager to get her opinions about the research I was also sensitive given the current circumstances that she may not want to engage in a one to one reflective discussion. However, she agreed to participate, so the rest of the group moved into the kitchen to begin their session, whilst Claudine and I remained in the classroom. I explained to her what happened during the focus group discussion and asked her to feed back about the lessons she felt she had learnt from this cooperative inquiry:

Me: Which, at, which particular aspects do you feel have been most effective?

Claudine: Well, er, giving each student a job, a role, that probably has been the most, because erm, like you said they have continued to do them [Me: Hum] and it’s made them more confident as well and...in their learning, like they all seem to be more confident really.
She believed that giving the students roles of responsibility had been instrumental to boosting their self-confidence. She then went on to talk about their learning and made links between learning and confidence. It appeared that she felt the students had not only become more confident in how they represented themselves, perhaps in how they were self-advocating, but also towards their college work. However, I may have influenced her thinking here by something I said in a previous conversation about how student roles had continued after the research. But, the fact that this was not mentioned during this particular discussion makes me think that maybe she was just reiterating what I had observed and in agreement. To pursue this line of inquiry further, I asked her what she meant by confidence and in what ways she felt the students had asserted this:

Confident in, in what way? How, how do you feel they have [Claudine: Well], become more confident?

Claudine: Frank in his speaking up, I know he spoke anyway, but speaking up, because he had that chairman role, he sort of come out of his shell a bit more, Lee with the er, camera, he’s taken that really seriously, and that’s come out that it’s something that he’d really like to do and he is actually really good at it [Me: Er hum] Whereas, he probably wouldn’t have had a chance to do that with the camera, before the research. Erm, James seems to be more confident in speaking to people and asking questions and er, I mean, I don’t know whether that’s to do a hundred percent with the research, but I, in my opinion I think it is.

Claudine referred to Frank ‘speaking up’, this being both in the literal sense and the metaphorical, as she explained that he had “come out of his shell”. This confirmed my earlier impressions about self-advocacy and self-determination, as the students felt that they could ‘speak up’ for themselves and have these opinions heard. She then drew upon other student examples to strengthen her argument about researcher roles resulting in more confidence. Seemingly, giving the students different roles of responsibility has enabled them to showcase their skills and assert authority.

Claudine observed how Lee took his role as camera man very seriously, perhaps, because he felt entrusted to look after this expensive piece of equipment and, furthermore, wanted to assure practitioners that he was the right person for the job. More interestingly, and with surprise, she stated he is “actually really good at it”. Maybe the opportunity of take pictures made Lee feel more valued, knowing that his contributions mattered giving him a greater sense of self-worth. This could suggest
that there is a need for exploration, opportunities in which students can self-discover, and for practitioners to examine those skills and find ways to add to them. In this sense, designated roles are not tokenistic gestures, but rather a means to get to know students better and a way to learn about their individual strengths. When asked about what methods she felt had been useful, in terms of eliciting responses and engaging with the students, Claudine replied:

_Erm...the body collages were good, because it brought things out sooner...you know what they thought they were good at and what they didn’t think they were good at._

_Me: Er hum._

_Claudine: Erm, so it brought that to light sooner than it probably would have done, without that, so that was a good method. But, it’s not something that we go back to and keep looking at and reminding ourselves of, so erm..._

She believed that this method brought things to light about the students much sooner. This led me to question whether practitioners sometimes feel hindered by what they do not understand about the students and limited by what they have been able to gauge. There is a sense here that practitioners are keen to obtain this information, to put the appropriate provisions in place. Claudine pointed out that although this has been an informative tool, practitioners have not used and referred to it enough to enlighten their practice.

Speculating here, that by ‘they’ she was referring to practitioner colleagues, rather than the cooperative. However, she could be asserting that body collages were not used to their advantage during the inquiry, and that, as a result, practitioners are unclear about how to facilitate such reviewing processes currently. Nevertheless, what is interesting is how useful Claudine found the method and how she is thinking beyond the inquiry and looking at how body collages could be employed as an evaluative tool. When asking Claudine about what she felt she has learnt from this inquiry, she responded with:

...maybe to listen more to the students and...Well, I always do try to listen to them anyway, but I mean...I don’t know, I don’t know, I’d have to think about that, hum, hum.

_Me: So you feel that, you feel then that it, it’s encouraged you to sort of._
Claudine: Not, maybe not to assume they can do certain things and they’re good at things, cos they think differently and see things differently to how...that goes to anybody though don’t it really?

Claudine explained that she had always tried to listen to what students had been saying, but I felt that she is now trying to ‘actively listen’. This goes beyond just simply sitting and hearing what is being said, but involves giving the students chances to voice and reflecting upon their ideas and being respectful towards those insights. Also, I got the impression that she had already reflected upon these differences and observed how the application of active listening has led to more comprehensive understandings. She illustrated this by talking about assumptions and how actively listening to the students has led her to change her assumptions about them. As with her other colleagues, Claudine also realised that her preconceived ideas about the students had been put into question. She acknowledged that the students think and see things differently from her, perhaps this even being a revelation that has made her confront and evaluate past practices.

After a lengthy dialogue about the need for practitioner reflection, as the journals were deemed ineffectual for everyday practice, Claudine suggested that practitioners could continue to complete journals but reflect upon these insights together (either once a week or every half term):

Yeah, yeah and then we can put all our ideas together and change the way we do support and work with them.

She felt that it would be beneficial to have time allotted in the day whereby practitioners could engage in critical collaborative reflection, thus allowing them to develop new ways to support the students. Collaborative conversations of this nature could result in a melting pot of different ideas. It would appear that Claudine recognised, like that of the students, that practitioner learning is also an evolutionary process.

In the following section I look again at the three accounts and my interpretations of them. My initial intentions were to add further rigour to my findings through applying another analytical process known as ‘categorical aggregation’ (see Chapter 4 for a detailed account). As I converted the data into categories, forming visual representations looking for patterns, an unexpected theme emerged which caused me to re-evaluate my original focus.
New perspectives on learners

Initially I focused on emic issues, namely what seemed to emerge from the direct interpretations and categorical aggregation, in terms of perceived supportive roles and general views about the cooperative inquiry. However, it was apparent on closer inspection, that practitioners were questioning their existing assumptions of the students, leading to some rather unexpected additional outcomes. Although I had noticed some changes to practitioner perceptions in the previous section and past chapters, it required further analysis to uncover the impact these had upon them and how they provided support. With this noticeable shift in thinking, I found myself reappraising the analysis as I was eager to identify what was influencing these epistemological changes. With this in mind, I began to re-examine my original focus of supportive provision, instead questioning how this was given as a result of changes to disabling attitudes. In other words, asking the following sub-questions and investigating two overlapping themes (etic issues): ‘What were the main factors in changing practitioner attitudes and perceptions of the students’ and ‘how did these influence their views of their supportive roles’?

I then reviewed my diagrams together, looking for common themes in these three accounts. Essentially, identifying factors that caused ‘interruptions to thinking’, encouraging practitioners to take an ‘inclusive turn’ (Refer to Appendix 3. Practitioner interview analysis). I present these findings under the two sub-question headings:

What were the main factors in changing practitioner attitudes and perceptions of the students?

It seemed that ‘MI theory’ and ‘co-researcher roles’ were the major factors that encouraged practitioners to rethink. Indeed, they acknowledged that by understanding intelligence differently, namely as a multifaceted skill set, and students taking on different roles of responsibilities that these had challenged their existing epistemologies. They believed that the body collage method has been instrumental in them getting to know students and seeing them as whole learners i.e. possessing diverse attributes and characteristics. With this new found thinking, practitioners commented that they have become more pro-active in identifying skills and questioning how these attributes can be cultivated in college and after students leave.
When reflecting upon student co-researcher roles, this was essentially about responsibility. But this entailed more than just reflecting upon their learning perspectives, as they were entrusted to the same degree as practitioners, i.e. to practice intuitive, self-reflective skills which resulted in them being elevated to supporter status. Subsequently, the level of practitioner expectation was raised, rather than restricted, as the students were likened to other adult learners. Tracey drew upon Lee, stating that she felt he had grown up, as he carried out his responsibilities with maturity, which exceeded her expectations. It seemed that by raising awareness about intelligences, being able to capture these skills through processes employed as well as students’ performing different roles, has encouraged practitioners to re-evaluate their deficit understandings. Indeed, they perceived the students as equals, responsible adults, who are able to articulate their thoughts and engage in reflective dialogue.

Although photo voice was also identified, student pictorial responses did not challenge disablist assumptions, but rather it was the realisation that they could use the camera independently and with little assistance. Practitioners seemed impressed by the students’ capability to capture pictures and expound upon their frames, which revealed further insights about them as learners.

The cooperative process has come to be understood as ‘meaning making together’, as with the earlier example of Lee, he is now perceived to be the problem solver rather than the problem. Practitioners actively want to consult with students, seeking their views to find solutions to the disabling learning environment and to improve their supportive provision. Consultation is sought to enrich their practice and not as a means to identify impairments and pathologise need. Developing this appropriate provision is no longer limited and based upon guess work through student profiles and observations, but instead is about allotting time and paying close attention to what is being voiced. From these reflective interruptions practitioners have been able to plan with the students and implement and assess these changes together.

**How did these influence their views of their supportive roles?**

Practitioners felt that they should be actively listening and giving the students plenty of time and chance to explore their learning potential. They believe that the students can engage in decision making, abstract dialogue and can contribute valuable insights about their own learning. Furthermore, they can carry out tasks independently with minimal supportive assistance. It seems that practitioners
have moved from a position of driving to sitting back and assessing the situation, allowing the students to lead the process.

They feel they can assess learner capabilities by giving the students plenty of opportunities, in which to experience and demonstrate their abilities. However, practitioners point out that as an informal assessment, this would need to be constantly reviewed and carried out together. This type of critical engagement would encourage them to continually question their existing assumptions, perhaps through identifying them first, making each other aware of them and then working towards reassessing these in everyday practice.

In the final section, I draw upon another analytic technique to compare these factors against alternative explanations.

**Rival explanations to explain changes to disabling attitudes**

With the above identified factors, I was eager to apply an additional element of rigour to examine these claims further. Based upon Yin’s (2003) analytic strategy, i.e. identifying other possible influences to explain my factors, I created a table showing the outcome with a rival explanation followed by a counter argument (refer to *Table 7.1 Rival explanations*). Yin asserts, “The simple or direct rival explanation would be that the observed outcomes were in fact the result of some other influence besides the intervention” (p. 122). Essentially, I did not want to be accused of “stacking the deck” in favour of theoretical ideas that I had introduced to the practitioners (Yin 2003, p. 113 citing Patton 1990).

**Table 1.7 Rival explanations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Rival explanations</th>
<th>Counter arguments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MI theory</td>
<td>Practitioners feel obliged to view the students through this perspective.</td>
<td>Obligated? Probably only in respect to carrying out the inquiry and exploring the ideas for themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It seems more ethical</td>
<td>Practitioner feedback has been honest, as they are not trying to pacify me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>They feel it has enabled them to</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(a nice thing to do) to think of the students possessing intelligences rather than being learning ‘disabled’.

Understand student strengths, which ultimately helps them know how to facilitate student development.

They provide examples of (observed) individual student strengths. They even go so far as to comment that students are more skilled than they realised and in particular tasks than they themselves are e.g. Tracey talking Jamie.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Co-researcher roles</th>
<th>The students are getting more attention.</th>
<th>Yes, more attention is being paid to them, but not because of learning deficits, but realised capabilities.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>They are imitating practitioners.</td>
<td>Attention is given, but not for the sake of it, as practitioners are assessing how students handle responsibilities – positions where students are contributing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Students are not simply imitating practitioners, as they opted for the roles that they wanted to do. I believe that this is more about students feeling valued for who they are. Not imitating, but rather more about equal status, being treated fairly and acknowledged as a credible source of knowledge – like practitioners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Practitioners are eager to carry on with these different roles of responsibility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Body collages</strong></td>
<td>It is a new method that has not been explored before – initial excitement.</td>
<td>This is more than just a new method employed, as practitioners feel this is a useful induction tool that has enabled them to ‘get to know’ the students better. They are eager to develop this further and apply insights gained into practice. However, they do need to think about how they plan to use this as a reviewing process/communal resource.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Photo voice</strong></td>
<td>It is a new method that has not been explored before – initial excitement.</td>
<td>I think the students’ pictures did cause a bit of initial excitement, but this was not so much about the images themselves, but rather the students’ abilities to take pictures and think in abstract terms. Practitioners seem more interested in exploring the process as a medium, instead of making sense of the individual pictures. I agree with this rival explanation to some extent, but differ in the sense that practitioners have carried on encouraging students to use the camera. They have also incorporated its use in other areas of practice i.e. students collecting pictures as evidence (record of achievements).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative process</td>
<td>The students are getting more attention.</td>
<td>Again, as with the researcher roles, yes students are getting more attention – but the crucial question here is why? This comes back to the idea that the students can self-reflect and play a valuable role in shaping their own learning.</td>
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<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Practitioners feel better about their own practice when listening to what the students have to say.</td>
<td>Practitioners believe that these reflective sessions are essential, both to aid them in their supportive roles and to provide the students space in which to practice critical self-reflection. Students are being honest and open through their accounts, which in turn are encouraging practitioners to re-think their perceptions of students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By applying rival explanations to identified factors, I have demonstrated that these implemented processes were indeed impacting. Despite opposing views about appeasing me and feeling morally obligated to the students, these factors challenged deficit epistemologies because practitioners witnessed their effects first-hand. Such alternative ways of working made them see and respond to the students as autonomous learners, which was felt to not only be equitable but more educationally effective. As such, these factors seem to have brought this community together and enabled students to become valuable consultants.

**Conclusion**

I embarked on this additional, rather unexpected, course of action because I had underestimated the value of practitioner contributions. I realised that their voices were missing from this inquiry when I reviewed interview data (from the previous chapter) and from my own reflective accounts. Indeed, with practitioners abandoning their journals I would have been left with limited data extracts and been
unable to explore their perceptions of supportive roles and inquiry processes. I returned to the college
four months after the inquiry had been completed to conduct informal interviews with them. From
analysing these accounts through applying direct interpretations, I identified that practitioners were
re-evaluating how they viewed the students, to such an extent that their deficit epistemologies had
been challenged. Eager to determine what was causing them to rethink and how this new found
thinking was influencing how they supported the students, I applied further analysis by asking the
following sub-questions: ‘What were the main factors in changing practitioner attitudes and
perceptions of the students’ and ‘how did these influence their views of their supportive roles’? It
seemed their ‘inclusive turn’ was attributed, mainly, to exploring the ideological framework of MI
theory and applying this understanding through body collages. Likewise, co-researcher roles,
encouraging equal status were also felt to be impacting. As such, practitioners’ re-evaluated
supportive roles, as they commented that they have been trying to actively listen, allowing the
students all the time they need to engage in reflective dialogue. Essentially, practitioners have begun
to see the students as valuable educational consultants.

In the following chapter I return to the rationale, central research questions and cooperative
processes explored that have directed this research. By drawing upon Chapters 5, 6 and 7 I discuss
what lessons have been learnt and, from this evidence, whether silences have been broken.
CHAPTER 8. Have silences been broken? Examining the evidence

In this chapter I present an overview of the cooperative inquiry. In so doing, I address the research questions that directed my study. Reflecting upon these questions, I return to Chapters 5, 6 and 7 to discuss collective findings of observed actions and co-researcher views.

I begin by reflecting upon what processes co-researchers felt enabled students to voice their learning preferences. This is followed by a discussion about significant findings that emerged from practitioner interview data (Chapter 7) and how this led to the identification of two major factors - MI theory (through the use of body collages) and new co-researcher roles (having equal status) – that caused interruptions to practice. I demonstrate that these factors not only challenged practitioner thinking, but also encouraged student self-determination.

As these factors prompted reciprocal reflexivity, I refer to these processes as ‘reflexive mirrors’. Such processes co-created reflective spaces, where co-researchers came together and established relationships of trust. As well as identifying what encouraged student voice, I also address the difficulties and challenges of this endeavour. With thinking being challenged, I present the changing supportive roles of practitioners and how these have moved from specialist roles towards intermediary roles. I then examine my influential role more thoroughly, before questioning whether silences have been broken.

Overview of the cooperative inquiry

In examining what I described as a culture of silence in Chapter 1, I argued that students with learning difficulties are prohibited from creatively taking part in the transformations of their educational settings and communities and prohibited from being. As a result, they are prohibited from having a valued learner identity, and as such prevented from having a voice in which to influence their educational circumstances. I went on to argue that this has kept these students submerged, under the false guise that educational failure and specialist/segregated placements are attributed to their inadequacies. Submersion may also extend beyond this social realisation, to where students are not even aware of their homogenised deficit identity. At the same, these students are usually seen in
a one-dimensional way, needing the same levels of educational support as each other. I argued that such disabling prohibitions/barriers stem from practitioner assumptions and wider sociological influences, which are also submerged in this same culture. Pathologies of silence are argued to be the by-products of a culture of silence, where educators are influenced by both overt and covert discriminative practices, to such an extent that they fail to develop strong relationships with their students. They fail to see the students as diverse, intellectual, capable individuals, who have views of their own and contributions to make to their immediate and external communities.

In order to break such cultures and pathologies of silence, as I explained, many writers have argued that students’ voices need to be heard, and with it an exploration of processes that can enable this to happen. However, despite students being consulted, their views are unlikely to be valued, due to these one-dimensional perceptions. As such, processes should begin by seeing students in a multi-dimensional way, recognising their individual differences not as problems to be fixed, but rather as opportunities to enrich learning. For this to happen, practitioners need to adopt a philosophy of acceptance, where difference is positively valued, or otherwise seen as being ‘normal’. I noted that Barton refers to this ideal as “a vision of democracy through difference”. Many are in agreement that to make progressive strides towards this vision, a dual focus needs to be on increasing student participation and restructuring deficit educational cultures.

Subsequently I recognised, in Chapter 3, that this calls for a free and open dialogue, where practitioners and students can come together as a community of practice. Such dialogical encounters need to draw upon accessible, flexible and innovative ways for students to advocate their views. It is recommended that plain language, bullet points, symbols, photographs, illustrations and audio/video aids be used to provide these different outlets. But in order for inclusive dialogue to ensue, this needs to be predicated upon enabling ideologies that can challenge and raise the educational status of students’ purported with learning difficulties.

In Chapter 2, I explained my position that a social model foundation might not only challenge practitioner determinist worldviews, but might also provide students with opportunities to empower themselves. As I delved into this discussion, it became apparent that people with learning difficulties are still developing ways in which to use this approach. Indeed, their involvement in the disability movement and emancipatory research is still in its early stages. Just as people with physical impairments have empowered themselves by exposing oppressive conditions, so too it is important
for people with learning difficulties to demonstrate that their intellectual difficulties are socially produced. Moreover, drawing upon the influential writings of Goodley and Ryan and Thomas, I identified three social constructions that have maintained this learning difficulty identity, these being: low intelligence, social incompetence and maladaptive functioning. Despite arguing that self-advocacy (i.e. self-determination) predominately through narrative style research can challenge these deficit assumptions, there has been no evidence to confirm that such actions are empowering to people with learning difficulties nor whether these have impacted upon others disabling perceptions. As such, I wanted to explore these impact claims further, to determine whether students would seize opportunities to ‘speak up’ for themselves and, indeed, whether practitioners would support such developments. Being applicable to an educational context, in Chapter 3 I was interested to explore the ideology of intelligence, and to ascertain whether another alternative worldview (i.e. MI theory) would encourage practitioners to see the students in a different way.

The inquiry I introduced to practitioners and students at an FE college was predicated upon emancipatory principles, which sought to transform the disabling environment and lead to practical outcomes. The major challenge of this inquiry was to address the social dynamics that preserve disabling identities and thus ideologies, namely what Finkelstein refers to as ‘disabling social relationships’. As the disability movement recognise social relations and research production to be instrumental in how disability is perceived, I was keen to investigate practitioner/student relations through cooperative inquiry. With this joint venture, focusing upon a commonality of purpose, everyone involved was allocated co-researcher status and selected specific responsibilities to perform. In amongst these different responsibilities, my co-researcher role was a facilitatory one, acting as a critical friend, attempting to bridge gaps and present alternative ways of knowing. In other words, proposing alternative possibilities to prompt action and reflection.

With the ideological frameworks of the social model of disability and MI theory, and our central theme of student learning preferences, the cooperative inquiry sought to bring student and practitioner co-researchers together to review current educational provision. The specific research methods explored included: body collages (based upon the theory of MI), student interviews, photo voice, reflective journals and portfolios. Co-researchers also engaged in research training and cycles of reflection, where findings were discussed together with ways of implementing the learning from this inquiry process. The purpose being to determine whether processes employed were not only effective at
eliciting student responses about their learning, but more importantly in raising their educational status (voices) and encouraging critical reflections from practitioners in relation to their supportive provision. As such, the inquiry was directed by the following research questions:

1. How can students with learning difficulties be helped to contribute to decision making about their own learning?

2. What are the difficulties of trying to address this issue?

3. What does this suggest about the roles of practitioners, who work with such students?

4. What should be the role of a facilitator in such processes?

Keeping these questions in sight in what follows, I reflect on my findings in order to draw out the main lessons learnt from this inquiry.

**How can students with learning difficulties be helped to contribute to decision making about their own learning?**

Reflecting upon recommendations for accessible, flexible and innovative ways for students to advocate their views, utilising a variety of means (as proposed by Walmsley, 2001; Walmsley and Johnson, 2003) I identified in Chapter 6 that co-researcher roles, portfolios, body collages and photo voice enabled them to voice their learning preferences. I will explain each of these processes in turn.

**Co-researcher roles**

All the students commented or expressed through other means (e.g. Frank designing his section of the poster), that they enjoyed having an allocated role of responsibility, which was similar to practitioners. But the reasons for this varied, from supporting one another, developing new skills, learning about themselves, showing their independence to asserting their authority. As such, I would argue that having a designated role, which Reason (1988) and Walmsley (2004) stress must be recognised and negotiated in the first instance, is essential to voice work. By declaring these different positions from the start, power sharing issues were more manageable, as everyone was clear about what they had to do (concurring with Townson et al, 2004), and respected one another's contributions. Recognition of these responsibilities seemed to be just as imperative as the functions
they actually served. Indeed, researcher roles were not figurehead positions, but critical to driving the inquiry and learning about students individually. For example, Kavita volunteered to be in charge of organising files, portfolios and journals, evidently understanding that by contributing her systemising, helpful skills this was for the benefit of the group (Chapter 6). However, although everyone opted to perform a specific task at the beginning, Reason (1988) contended that there must be room for re-negotiation, as co-researchers may want to swap roles and/or share their responsibilities. Indeed, this happened with James and Lee, as they swapped over their roles, which I believe was prompted by Lee, as he discovered he had a keen eye for photography. Also both Frank and Shaffia wanted to be chairperson, so it was mutually agreed that they could share this role and alternate these duties each meeting.

These new researcher roles enabled the students to have both a democratic voice, where they utilised their positions to express themselves, and to share personal contributions (complying with Swain and French, 1998). By having specific roles, students gained more confidence and the ability to exert their influence, as they felt their unique contributions were being valued. For example, in Chapters 5 and 6 Shaffia certainly drew upon her chairing responsibilities to assert her voice, reprimanding practitioners for talking over her, and myself for laughing. Although she enjoyed being in this heightened position of power, as she recited this particular incident, this meant more than just telling others what to do. Rather, this was a political platform in which to project her views, demonstrate her skills, challenge the learning circumstances, and direct changes i.e. calling a disabling society to account (as proposed by Moore et al., 1998). Evidently, co-researcher status enabled students to emancipate themselves, as they were elevated to practitioner positions, where their views were taken seriously and where they supported other members of the group. Moreover, James felt that practitioners were able to trust him (Chapter 6), as his cooperative responsibilities enabled him to demonstrate maturity whilst using the video camera, inspiring greater confidence in his abilities and gaining respect as an adult.

**Portfolios**

When we examine these findings more closely, it is apparent that portfolios encouraged reflective self-analysis, as Kavita, Lee and Shaffia all mentioned (see Chapter 6) that collecting numerous artefacts made them think about new things. For James, this was more about having the opportunity to search for images on the internet, which he felt represented him. I got the impression from both
James and Lee that they felt creating portfolios enabled them to control the process, as they not only selected what they wanted to include, but assembled these how they wanted. But, despite sharing the content of portfolios at the end of inquiry cycles, these were predominately carried out in isolation of other co-researchers. Which has led me to question (drawing upon Freire, 1972), have such isolated processes enabled student co-researchers to become conscious of their own perceptions of reality, and to deal critically with them? In other words, have portfolios encouraged reflexivity, where students feel they can assert their voices amongst those of practitioners; taking space for themselves, and not waiting to have this given to them (ibid; Oliver, 1990; 1992; Barton, 1998a; 1998b; Williams et al, 2005)?

It would seem from Tracey and Claudine’s feedback (in the same chapter) that portfolios were not as empowering as they would appear, as they shared concerns about influencing student selections, fearful that they were putting words into students mouths and thus unintentionally muffling their voices. This would suggest that while practitioners’ consciousness had been raised, as they were fully supportive of students taking charge, the students were unaware of these powers of suggestion. But is this altogether surprising, given that students are used to practitioners assisting them in making day to day decisions and in expressing their opinions? I would argue that while portfolios clearly encouraged individual reflection, they did not challenge the power differentials enough, to the extent where students critically questioned the status quo. However, Tracey attributed these problems to how the method was carried out, suggesting that practitioners needed to facilitate the reflective process in a different way, which would encourage greater student autonomy.

**Body collages**

As I explained in Chapter 6, both Frank and Shaffia stated that the body collage method enabled them to engage accessibly in personal reflection and share these insights with the rest of the cooperative. It seemed, coupled with observations reported in Chapter 5, that the process of learner reflexivity, followed immediately by presenting these findings and engaging in collaborative dialogue made them feel more empowered. Both co-researchers attributed this enabling space to practitioners listening, inferring that the method captured their full attention. It struck me that both students were perceptive, indeed, as all practitioners commented (Chapter 6 and 7) that body collages brought individual learner identities to the forefront, enabling them to understand how the students perceived themselves and where intellectual strengths lay. Indeed, the students seemed to exhibit a heightened
sense of self-awareness, as they seized the space to explain themselves and assist others to do the same e.g. Frank supporting Kavita and Shaffia to expound upon their collection of images. It was evident from Chapter 5, that not only did body collages demonstrate their self-determination, but it also showed how well they knew themselves (certainly by the second cycle), as both Frank and Kavita drew our attention to activities that they liked, but found challenging.

However, this method was not really about student self-discovery, but rather the opportunity to reveal and reclaim their intellectual identity (in attempts to raise conscientisation) and placing the onus on practitioners to respond (as argued by Frankham, 2009 citing Lewis, 2004). For example, in Chapter 6 James acknowledged that while he did not learn anything new about himself (aside from using the video camera), he did learn about people being different. In Chapter 5, Frank, while sharing insights about his intellectual profile, alerted practitioners to disabling aspects of the classroom i.e. inaccessible computer keyboards; which Lorraine was quick to remedy by ordering new computer equipment. Also, during both cycles, Kavita explained that naturalistic intelligence was one of her strengths, and that she was keen to do more gardening and agricultural activities. This was then pursued as one of her cooperative goals, as practitioners organised more excursions to local allotments, parks and planned gardening/planting activities around the college grounds.

Photo voice

Although photo voice was identified, by both the students and practitioners as being an accessible means in which to advocate views, it seemed to have a limited impact. It was initially useful in assisting students to communicate their preferences, in relation to areas around college that they liked/disliked and, drawing upon the abstract, to explain their aspirations for the future. But despite these images igniting an initial dialogue (during reflective meetings), the outcomes of these seemed to be rather short lived. However, there were a few exceptions where practitioners heeded student views and adapted their practices accordingly e.g. ensuring Lee’s personal space was respected; this being evident from my own observations of Tracey’s reactions (end of Cycle 1) and from Lee’s comments during the final interview (Chapters 5 and 6). So why then did this method not cause ‘interruptions’ (as suggested by Ainscow, 2005; Ainscow et al, 2006; Ainscow and Miles, 2010), when students clearly exhibited empowerment and their images prompting further discussions? This may have been due to the images not being made available to cooperative members for constant review.
For example, in Chapter 7 I reported how Claudine mentioned that although pictorial responses were initially informative, accessible adaptations to the learning environment had not been made.

I attribute this lack of access to a breakdown of communication on my part, as student images were downloaded onto the classroom computer. Perhaps these should have been printed out and stored in student portfolios instead, so that co-researchers could access these whenever they wanted. However, being a cooperative inquiry and by its very nature organic, photo voice evolved into another practice altogether. Rather than questions leading the inquiry, with students taking pictures and using the camera only when invited to do so, it developed into an accessible resource that students used whenever they liked. In this sense, the camera was no longer a piece of equipment exclusively used by practitioners, off limits to students or only used under supervision, it is now a tool available for anybody to use. Indeed, this voice tool has not only enabled the students’ to capture their individual perspectives, but it has also enabled them to perform practitioner roles, as they decided what was credible evidence to represent student progress. Indeed, in Chapter 7, Mark even jested that practitioners rarely get to use the camera any more, as students have dominated its use.

Although these empowering outcomes were serendipitous, and as it transpired, have led to interruptions to practice, I questioned why was the original format of critically exploring the context less impacting? In response, I wonder whether photo elicitation often makes the familiar familiar, rather than unfamiliar (Delmont, 1992). For example in Ainscow and Kaplan (2005) and Kaplan’s (2008) accounts they explain how they conducted a photo voice project with a group of disadvantaged adolescent students, encouraging them to capture images to project their views about the school environment and their own experiences. The external researchers facilitated opportunities for the students to exhibit these images, with accompanying commentary, to create PowerPoint presentations. However, when these findings were presented to the head teacher and senior management team the researchers were met with hostility and told that student responses were ‘untrue’ and ‘unfair’ representations (Kaplan, 2008).

I draw upon this example to illustrate how often well intentioned external researchers can, inadvertently, perpetuate hegemony. As despite students accessibly voicing their views through the medium of photo voice, they were not given the opportunity to present these insights to the practitioners themselves; thereby allowing them to expound upon and justify their (albeit controversial) findings. Rather, these were relayed back to the practitioners by the researchers, which
I would argue, creates a further divide and, thus problematises the credibility of student responses. I also believe that practitioners are likely to be resistant to feedback when feeling on the peripherals of an inquiry largely involving external researchers and students. It seems practitioners are often only consulted and/or included at the end of a process, and expected to implement changes without being meaningfully involved from the beginning. Although Ainscow and Kaplan applied Elliot’s (1991) advice to ‘let colleagues know what we are doing and why’ to address professional hierarchy, it seems to me that nothing less than full participation will bridge this divide.

Despite the inquiry I initiated involving everyone from the beginning; the walk and talk activity was exclusively between students and myself. I have come to realise that this interactional activity was perhaps even more revealing than the still frames captured, as I was able to observe (see Chapter 5) students asserting their independence and creativity, as they supported each other. To some extent, the images became by-products, as I found the reflective exchanges between the students extremely rich and insightful. To illustrate my point, Kavita explained that she wanted to capture a particular student, who she felt was being too aggressive with her. But, reflecting upon the ethical implications of this, Frank and Lee suggested that she ‘stand up’ for herself instead and that her picture should represent her doing this. They then proceeded to assist Kavita with setting up this image, which featured her standing outside the classroom with her arms folded. This exchange not only demonstrated co-researchers empathy and encouragement towards each other, but it also showed them creatively solving problems to ensure that the same message was conveyed, but in an alternative way. When it came time to present her images to the rest of the cooperative, she found it difficult to recall why she captured this particular picture of herself. The group then speculated that this had something to do with the classroom, associating the picture with the context. It was at this point that I interjected to remind Kavita that this picture represented her ‘standing up’ for herself. This in turn jogged Frank and Lee’s recollection and a further confirmation from Kavita.

Although Kavita, Frank and Lee briefly explained how this pictorial response came about, I felt the in the moment impact got lost in second-hand translation, as the focus was solely on the frame itself. I was also uncomfortable about having to remind students about what this represented, as I felt this questioned their credibility as researches. Essentially, what I am arguing here is that practitioners would have benefitted from witnessing these interactions and responses first-hand, rather than having them relayed back to them second-hand. It seems that my student colleagues were well aware of this
impact loss before me, as Lee, during the second cycle of photo voice, wanted to invite Lorraine to capture pictorial responses about her future aspirations.

I argue that by practitioners not engaging in every aspect of an activity, the relational separation between them and their students remains, as it is easier for them to remedy problems noticeable in public spaces, rather than to reflect critically upon the inquiry process and the messages behind the pictures taken (as proposed by Kaplan, 2008). It is for these reasons, that I feel that educators/external researchers need to facilitate collaborative spaces, bringing everyone together, where students can voice ideas about themselves, have these learning preferences heard (first-hand) and invite practitioners to question assumptions. This could explain why students later adapted the format to be more inclusive, so that practitioners could witness their self-determination directly.

Although staying with the first research question, I move away from the accessibility of cooperative processes to assessing the impact these had upon practitioners. In the discussion that follows, I present what I believe to be significant findings about what created enabling conditions for students to voice. These subsequent findings were reported in Chapter 7, where I invited practitioners to reflect upon the overall experience.

**Identifying factors that caused interruptions to thinking**

As practitioner reflective journals were considered to be too impractical, these were abandoned several months into the inquiry. With no journal entries to retrieve, being limited to my own insights and student interview data, I realised I would have to hold additional discussions with my practitioner colleagues to understand more about their perceived supportive roles and general views about cooperative processes. This was also coupled by an acknowledgement that they were important facilitators to enabling a principled approach to be cultivated, and indeed, the continual practice of inquiry processes.

After holding these discussions, I analysed the data through direct interpretations and by applying categorical aggregation to pull out emerging themes in relation to my objectives. However, on closer inspection, it was apparent that they were questioning their existing assumptions of students, leading to some rather unexpected additional outcomes. As such, I found myself reappraising the analysis, to identify influential factors that caused these interruptions to thinking, and thus how they viewed their
supportive roles. I was reminded that “strategies for developing inclusive practices have to involve interruptions to thinking, in order to encourage ‘insiders’ to explore overlooked possibilities for moving practice forward” (Ainscow, 2005, pp. 121-122). The following identified factors acted as evidence that challenged existing practitioner assumptions, indeed reiterating Ainscow et al (2006) and Ainscow and Miles’ (2010) observations, resulting in them re-evaluating contextual barriers and wider educational community values (as proposed by Elliott, 1991; Ainscow, 2002; Booth and Ainscow, 2002) i.e. taking an inclusive turn (Ainscow, 2007b). It would seem that practitioners have not only been made to critically review their one dimensional views of students (Barton, 2008), but also the very epistemological foundations upon which these are predicated.

From my combined analysis in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, body collages (influenced by MI theory) and co-researcher roles (having equal status) were deemed to be influential factors that caused practitioners to rethink. These concepts evolved from introducing alternative ways to view educational provision, to exploring how these different ideas could be put into practice. Essentially, practitioners witnessed first-hand how theoretical arguments could be translated into applications. They were then given the opportunity throughout the inquiry to assess whether these alternative perspectives added value to their current ways of knowing and everyday practices. I now briefly explain how these factors caused interruptions.

**Reclaiming intellectual identities**

By introducing MI theory, followed by inviting co-researchers to explore student body collages, practitioners were to some extent forced to examine their worldviews. Up until this point, deficit assumptions made them dwell on intellectual impairments, seeing the students as being incapable, unable to articulate opinions (let alone engaging in learner reflexivity) and therefore needing a considerable amount of support. Tracey even admitted that she would often label students and instinctively step in and do things for them, without questioning her actions. However, this factor has challenged these disabling views to the extent where practitioners are pausing to think about how they can best facilitate learning, with this beginning with: what are student intelligences? They saw the body collage method as an essential induction/annual tool to get to know the students and to learn more about their diverse learner characteristics. This seems to be driven by learner strengths, working closely with students and allowing these to manifest through careful observations.
Rethinking relationships between learners and practitioners

Having a specific role of responsibility, to some degree at least, enabled the students to feel at a similar level to practitioners, where they have been entrusted to the same degree i.e. to practise intuitive, self-reflective skills which resulted in them being elevated to supporter status. Subsequently, the level of practitioner expectation was raised, as instead of being restricted, students were likened to other adult learners. By not seeing the students as learning disabled, but rather as young responsible adults performing significant roles, they were perceived as equals. As such, practitioners reported a growing confidence, where students were ‘speaking up’ and engaging in reflective practices. Students were treated as consultants, where their views were sought to find solutions to disabling learning contexts and to improve provision.

Although these two factors appeared to challenge deficit epistemologies, remaining critical, I asked myself what difference does it make whether practitioners see the students as disabled or not? In the following discussion I expound upon the educational advantages of responding to the students in multi-dimensional ways.

Enabling space and educational effectiveness

My analysis revealed that understanding the whole learner made a significant difference, as the students became more confident they ‘spoke up’. This led to independence and autonomy, essentially what the course is about; learning life skills to prepare for work and become active members of their local communities. From a curriculum point of view, objectives were being met. Moreover, practitioners became more aware about individual student needs/aspirations and how best to support those. They were equipped with insider knowledge to discern how they could prepare students for transition, as strengths and interests were recognised. I would argue that these practices led to greater educational effectiveness, as argued by Ainscow (1997), as previously, practitioners relied upon their own observations to interpret this provision. Although open to what they might find, they often reverted back to their disabling assumptions. For example, Lorraine commented that she would look at their profile and make judgements about what they could and could not do before getting to know them.

I argue that hegemony stems from this, as practitioners were placed in a heightened position to make preconceived assumptions about student capabilities. However, with the factor of students as
co-researchers, being equal (in terms of sharing space) to practitioners, an array of personal learner information became readily available. This led staff members to take an ‘inclusive turn’ (Ainscow, 2007b), where they critically observed that their disabling assumptions were limiting learner potential and examined ways in which this might be addressed. For example, Lorraine stated that she was now constantly trying not to be clouded by things that she was reading about the students.

Such single dimensional judgements (as described by Barton, 2008), it seemed, had prevented them from seeing the students as whole, multi-dimensional learners (like everybody else). Although the practice of reading personal profiles is unlikely to cease, as this serves the valuable function of alerting practitioners to any serious medical conditions, the notion that these provided an overall student understanding was dangerously misleading and needed to be challenged. Such findings show that collaborative processes are essential to uncovering and co-constructing other more important learner understandings.

With this in mind, I now explore how the identified factors (mentioned above) caused all the co-researchers to re-evaluate their own and others learner status; this being indicative of Fielding’s (2004) earlier arguments about how creating communities of practice can be transformative.

**Co-creating spaces through reflexive mirrors**

Reclaiming intellectual identities (through body collages) and rethinking relationships between learners and practitioners (through shared roles) were identified by students as accessible platforms in which to raise their voices and by practitioners as effective tools to enable them to gain more insight. Just as these factors caused practitioners to rethink, so too did they cause students to empower themselves, therefore prompting ‘reciprocal reflexivity’. I refer to these reciprocal factors as ‘reflexive mirrors’, as they revealed more than just the immediate reflections of students/practitioners, but encouraged them to critically examine their own reflections and the contextual circumstances constructing these.

**Reflexive mirrors**

I argue that reflexive mirrors caused co-researchers to recognise and emerge from silences and then to turn upon them. This instigated action and reflection, where students and practitioners began to see each other differently and, thus, the contributions that each other could bring to the process.
These understandings moved them from inclusive dialogue, to interdependence, where they deconstructed deficit epistemologies to co-construct alternative truths. For example in Chapter 7 practitioner co-researchers stated that MI theory (through body collages) enabled them to see the students, themselves and others differently. As such, these mutually engaging tools:

- presented alternative ways of knowing and understanding.
- raised conscientisation.
  - raising awareness about being oppressed/prohibited.
  - raising awareness about being an oppressor/prohibiting others.
- encouraged everyone to become a learner.

Also, the body collage method and allocated researcher roles were not only effective at bringing everyone together and prompting critical collective/individual analysis, but were accessible in three different ways:

- Accessible political platforms - enabling students to project their views about learning preferences and to critically address their disabling circumstances.

- Accessible interruptions – because practitioners were involved in processes from the beginning and throughout their revisions (i.e. re-formatting body collages), they were more receptive towards student perspectives.

- Accessible long term – as these methods led to students ‘speaking up’ and an array of learner information (e.g. identified intellectual strengths), these outcomes were deemed beneficial and worth pursuing.

What was interesting about these three accessible outcomes, was how despite power being more evenly distributed and students asserting their new found authority (e.g. Shaffia, as reported in Chapters 5 and 6), practitioners seemed to not be threatened nor deterred by this. Rather, they appeared to join in the process of struggle, as reflexive mirrors exposed the socio-political landscape revealing that students are indeed unjustly dealt with (as argued by Freire, 1972). Such embodiment notions about intellectual impairment have been thrown into question, confirming that self-advocacy can empower students, whilst also impacting upon practitioner disabling perceptions. I concur that student resilience can project their humanity (as proposed by Goodley, 2000; Finkelstein, 2001) and
that these skills are indeed essential for transitional phases of FE (as argued by Reiff, 2007). However, it is important to note that student self-determination was not exhibited through narrative style approaches, but rather through cooperative processes, involving everyone, and drawing upon emancipatory principles.

**Challenging identity boundaries**

Providing further argument for communities of practice to address this issue, I extend Finkelstein’s (2001) powerful social prison analogy further to construct my own educational prison of disadvantage. Here I illustrate how identified reflexive mirrors enabled students to empower themselves with practitioners encouraging these actions. The following alphabetical sequence corresponds with the diagrams presented in *Box 8.1 Challenging identity boundaries*.

A. Students with learning difficulties are placed in an educational prison, where the walls are made from ‘low intelligence’, ‘deficit/lacking something’, ‘learner dependency’ and ‘needing specialist/separate provision’ identity (value) boundaries

B. Many supportive researchers believe experiential accounts (Chappell et al, 2001), through narrative style approaches (i.e. Goodley, 2000; 2001; 2004 and Atkinson, 2004) can empower these students. Indeed, some (e.g. Leicester, 1999; Rustemier, 2003 and Martin, 2009) have drawn upon these approaches to capture insider experiences of exclusion in FE, in endeavours to rupture these confines. Researchers attempt this by visiting the students in prison and inviting them to describe their disabling conditions and/or to share stories about their exclusionary experiences.

C. However, I argue that exploring student experiences about ‘educational captivity’ is ineffectual, as these experiential accounts not only maintain the status quo but are morally misguided. Student freedom (empowerment) cannot be ‘given’ by a researcher (Freire, 1972; Oliver, 1990; 1992; Barton, 1998a; 1988b; Williams et al, 2005) nor can it happen staying inside the prison (continually being perceived as learning disabled. Rather, “nothing less than dismantling the prison and replacing it with a non-competitive form of society can break-down the doors which bar [...] emancipation” (Finkelstein, 2001, p. 15). The researcher needs to facilitate such actions (Barnes, 2003; Walmsley and Johnson, 2003), by utilising their external perspective (Dyson, 1998; Ainscow, 2002; 2005; Ainscow et al, 2006; Booth and Ainscow, 2002) and building relationships of trust between ‘student prisoners’ and their ‘practitioner prison guards’. Alternative possibilities for understanding these
circumstances (Dyson, 1998) i.e. ideological frameworks can inspire dialogical tools/spaces to be created (Freire, 1972).

I have demonstrated that the reflexive mirrors of reclaiming intellectual identities (through body collages) and rethinking relationships between learners and practitioners (through shared roles) were instrumental in encouraging students and practitioners to work together and challenge these oppressive identity boundaries. I observed through my own observational findings and analysis of direct feedback, how students pushed against these walls whilst practitioners were, simultaneously, pulling them out. By challenging the relational dynamics that maintain disabling social relationships I believe that the overlapping objectives of reciprocity, gain, and empowerment (put forward by Oliver, 1990; 1992; Zarb, 1992), were achieved.

Box 8.1 Challenging identity boundaries

A. Student in educational prison

B. Sharing their experiential account with a researcher

C. Utilising reflexive mirrors to work together and dismantle oppressive identity boundaries
Relationships of trust

Such reflexive mirrors served to bridge the hierarchy divide, forging relationships of trust between students and practitioners. This communion of solidarity was evident from James’s comments about feeling more trusted and from Tracey’s remarks about socialising with Lee outside of college (in Chapters 6 and 7). Returning to Freire’s (1972) assertions about relationships of trust being the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change, it is clear that practitioners felt that they could trust the students and, equally, students felt they could trust them. These findings also reiterated Hart (2003) and Hart et al (2004; 2007) transformability principle, as ‘trusting’ and ‘equal responsibilities’ challenged co-researcher epistemologies relating to ability and conceptualisations about students being passive recipients. It seemed our commonality of purpose (as argued by Tregaskis, 2004) of student learning preferences laid the foundations with reflexive mirrors strengthening these relational interactions. It is for these reasons, I content that ‘relationships are the inclusive cornerstone’, as the inquiry started by addressing these dynamics and continued to make familiar relationships unfamiliar (Delmont, 1992).

From discussing inquiry processes that brought co-researchers together, thus establishing interdependent relationships and enabling conditions for students to voice, I respond to the second research question to identify elements that created challenges.

What are the difficulties of trying to address this issue?

Returning to Gibson’s (2006) assertions to acknowledge the tensions and complexities involved when attempting to break silences, I draw upon my findings in Chapter 6 and 7. These ranged from trying to initiate a cooperative inquiry to difficulties experienced when carrying out the research. As these challenges mainly fell into two categories, I condense these under two subheadings: ‘time and commitment’ and ‘accessibility’.

Time and commitment

Although I had originally planned to conduct the inquiry at the Overmead campus, having agreed this beforehand with my practitioner colleagues, this first attempt fell apart. It seemed practitioners were half-hearted in their efforts to create meaningful spaces in which to listen to the views of their students, as they decided that training sessions and the following voice activities would commence
over the lunch time period. Despite reporting that this was the most convenient time for them, they had not consulted with students nor considered support staff, who were often busy assisting other students. They had also overlooked impromptu staff meetings, which would require their attendance and take precedence over the inquiry. As such, student voice was seen as an ‘add on’, a tokenistic gesture, rather than an educational priority. I am reminded by Miles and Ainscow (2010) that allocating ‘time’ in educational contexts is a form of currency, signalling that something is important. If something is seen as an educational priority, time will always be found. This could explain why the majority of students participating dropped out after only a few sessions, as they may have believed that their contributions were not important enough to warrant quality time to listen.

Rather than criticise my colleagues’ for the apparent lack of commitment, their responses were not altogether unexpected. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, practitioners often feel bombarded by policies as they receive little guidance about how to implement, amend and reflect upon these ideas in practice. Moreover, they tend to repeatedly exert tokenistic gestures to be seen to be taking account of their recommendations. This, I believe, is also coupled with ‘burn out’ (Schön, 1991b), as they become disaffected by what ultimately proves to be unproductive ways of working. However, being critical of my facilitatory position, I also allowed practitioners to dominate this space rather than equalising it for all co-researchers, thus inadvertently perpetuating hegemony and further tokenism.

Time and commitment are valuable educational commodities, which are not only a requirement for cooperative approaches, but are also outward gestures that student voices are worth pursuing. I learnt, as a facilitator, that I could assist other co-researchers with timetabling, so everyone was in agreement about how and when to conduct voice work. For example, with the Newton inquiry Lorraine set aside Thursday afternoons as our designated time, which was then approved by everyone else. This fundamental decision seemed to mark the beginning of our collaborative commitment, as co-researchers consulted with each other about other decisions from this point onwards.

Accessibility

I begin this discussion by reiterating that processes employed must to be determined by the participants themselves (as argued by Stone and Priestley, 1996; Barnes and Sheldon, 2007); which is why it is imperative to hear their views about what did not work as well as what did. In other words,
what aspects caused or created additional barriers, rather than platforms in which to project student voices?

Although it was my role to convey academic information as accessibly as I could, there were occasions where I was less than attentive i.e. lengthy meetings and the use of academic jargon. I felt that such absentmindedness only served to divide me from the context, as practitioner colleagues commented that during these inaccessible incidents they recognised me as an academic, rather than as a critical friend (Chapter 7). Wanting to veer away from such dominant power positions, as acknowledged by Elliott (1991), I realised that the whole process needed to be less prescribed and more organic. In addition to these complexities, all the co-researchers stated that they found reflective journals difficult, with these reasons ranging from it being linguistically inaccessible, forgetting about it and finding the time to write in it. All these issues made me acutely aware, as inferred by Rogers (1999) and Goodley and Moore (2000), that there are indeed numerous difficulties when trying to make outlets both accessible and academically recognised. However, reflexive mirrors and designing and presenting a poster show promise when bridging this divide and extending these values into society - this being essential for inclusive developments (according to Cummings et al, 2003).

Despite requiring us all to invest a substantial amount of time and energy, it was mutually felt that cooperative processes were essential to improving practices. Indeed, practitioners believed these served to regulate their deficit epistemologies and that it was their responsibility to continue to facilitate such opportunities, implying that student views were not only heard, but respected. With the proceeding question I elaborate upon this new found supportive role further.

**What does this suggest about the roles of practitioners, who work with such students?**

Thinking about how these overall findings impacted upon co-researcher understandings of the practitioner supportive role, I am reminded that these should not be undervalued nor made invisible, since Walmsley (2004) argues, this deserves more than just a passing and self-effacing mention. I begin this discussion by looking at power relations and how defining and sharing responsibilities enabled practitioners to assist students. This is followed by student and practitioner views about how the specialist role has evolved into a supportive intermediary role.
Sharing power within an educational context

In an attempt to elevate the students, it could be argued that practitioners were continuing with roles that they were already accustomed to i.e. Lorraine taking minutes, Claudine, Tracey and Mark assisting students where needed (reading aloud, downloading data onto the computer and other technical aspects). However, I noticed that there was something very significant about having these duties defined, both for them and the students. These supportive co-researcher roles enabled practitioners to know where the boundaries lay and what was expected from them.

As is evident in Chapter 1, student voice initiatives are usually swinging from one extreme to the other (refer to Box 8.2 Swinging power pendulum). On the one side practitioners are driving activities, usually because they feel a sense of obligation through institutional pressures or they believe certain students are unable to articulate their views. On the other side, students are leading these processes, where they are assuming educator roles and devaluing practitioner contributions. For students with learning difficulties, where the issue of listening to these views is even more pressing (see earlier arguments posed by Gibson, 2006; Rudduck and Fielding, 2006; Whitehurst, 2006; Czerniawski et al, 2009), one extreme results in tokenism, where views are sought to ‘tick a box’ and the other in further homogenising practices where their individuality gets lost in an attempt to liberate the marginalised group in which they represent. Whichever way the pendulum swings, practitioners often feel pressurised, anxious, or threatened, as the onus to facilitate such developments is on them.

In relation to supportive co-researcher roles, I would argue that more attention needs to be on finding a middle ground, building upon existing foundations of educator-student relations (as these associations will never change) and drawing upon these different positions of strength. Student voice is essentially about forging relationships of trust, respect and co-ownership, where collaborative actions can enhance the educational experiences of all. As my findings show, learning preferences cultivated a ‘communal venturing forth’ (Aoki, 1984), where both students and practitioners became interdependent focusing upon ‘communal resolutions’.

Student views

As I explained in Chapter 6, the students saw this supportive role as an intermediary role, where practitioners could help them access their local communities. They advocated that they wanted to learn about local amenities and transport links, so that they could access these independently. It was mutually agreed, during the first cycle, that the group would organise trips to each of the students’ local areas. Having established these links, students commented that they wanted practitioners to offer more employment opportunities. Although they felt that practitioners could help them make these initial contacts, they were keen to be supported by their new employers. It was evident that they wanted to move away from learning disability connotations, and be treated like every other young person at the pivotal stage of transition into work.

The students also felt that it was important to share their learning preferences through the end of year presentations, where family and others working closely with them would be in attendance. Lee even saw this as the pinnacle of the inquiry, and was keen for Lorraine to orchestrate this event, ensuring
that everyone present would be ready to listen to what he had to say. Frank and Mark both stated that presenting work outside college was an enriching experience, as the students were able to showcase their work and assert their individual and collective voices. From these findings, it seemed students wanted practitioners to assume similar supportive roles to those of supportive researchers, acting as intermediaries and creating enabling conditions for them to advocate their views in and beyond the remits of college.

**Practitioner views**

It seemed that the practitioners had joined in the process of struggle, as they fully supported these transitional ideals. This was attributed to how they now perceived students, seeing them more as consultants, colleagues who could inform them about their practices. Such new found thinking led to them standing back, allowing students to take the lead, and only giving additional support when invited to do so. It was evident that deficit assumptions about capabilities had been replaced by possibility assumptions, as practitioners believed that the students could do tasks independently. They explained that the impact of reflexive mirrors had made them more receptive, approaching learning situations with ‘what can they do’ (commented by Mark see Chapter 7), rather than allowing preconceived notions to dictate outcomes. Like their student colleagues, they were also thinking beyond the college.

Building upon this intermediary role, practitioners felt that they should be actively listening and providing students with an array of opportunities to explore their learning potential. They believed that their role was to enable conditions where the students could demonstrate their reflective, abstract skills. It appeared that they too thought this role was a facilitatory one and not a specialist one, seeing it as their responsibility to assist in deconstructing deficit misconceptions. All the practitioners agreed that collaborative reflective processes were essential to these developments, both for them to engage with students and with each other to continually question deterministic assumptions.

I now address my final research question, as I assess my critical friend status, and continue to apply a sense of vulnerability to my analysis and discussion (as found in Priestley and Stone, 1996).
What should be the role of a facilitator in such processes?

My role as a facilitator was to introduce co-researchers to alternative worldviews (as argued by Dyson, 1998), providing them with initial training (Walmsley and Johnson, 2003; Abell et al, 2007), facilitating research production and bridging gaps (Goodley, 2000; Chapman and McNulty, 2004) between them and other research communities. As the inquiry was predicated upon emancipatory principles, I was also aware that this role was a political act (Oliver, 1992, Zarb, 1992; Barnes, 1996b, Barton, 1998a; Dyson, 1998). Such activism required me to declare ‘whose side I was on’ (Oliver, 1992; Zarb, 1992; Barnes 1996b; Walmsley and Johnson, 2003), with this being primarily the students. However, by focusing the majority of my attention on student voice, I had overlooked practitioner voices/methods, as I had limited their expressions to reflective journals. It was only when reviewing my reflexive analysis that I realised that my activist and researcher roles had become blurred (Goodley, 2000). These critical insights led me to interview practitioners later on; the findings of which have proven to be fundamental to my arguments that cooperative processes can challenge disabling social relationships (as proposed by Finkelstein, 1980; 1981; 2001).

Despite being overzealous in my efforts to convey research principles and my neglect to make materials more accessible, I was able to utilise my external perspective to suggest alternative ideas and ways to exhibit voice work. For example, creating and presenting an academic poster was a progressive step for co-researchers, demonstrating their understanding of the social model as they represented their views and resilience publically. I saw my role as facilitating opportunities for those submerged in silences to see and interact with each other differently. However, I was also aware about practitioner distrust towards outsiders introducing (perhaps even imposing) unorthodox theories (Elliot, 1991), and having no regard for contextual sensitivity. Mark actually stated (in Chapter 7) that he was initially sceptical, believing that this research might be an academic project to further my career. But, being a practitioner myself, I was mindful that this inquiry would need to improve practice and not just produce knowledge (ibid; Schön, 1991a). This is why alternative worldviews were accompanied by applications, as I wanted co-researchers to explore these for themselves, taking co-ownership of how they would evolve and deciding whether these added anything to their current practices. Indeed, it was not my intention to test these processes, but rather to explore whether they encouraged the capacity for self-reflection (Elliot, 1991).
I realise that it was a controversial move on my part to introduce MI theory, as it is met with much hostility, even within the inclusive education/responding to diversity camps. For example, Thomas and Loxley (2007) contest Gardner’s neurological basis, stating that the theory is a ‘mythical’ misleading concept that diverts attention away from ‘real’ contextual issues. What is also interesting, is that Hart et al were considering using the theory, but decided against it, arguing “that the most powerful and persuasive models would be developed by the educators themselves” (2004, p. 42). There are also many others who adopt this view e.g. Ainscow et al (2006) and Miles and Ainscow (2010). Although I do not disagree, I believe this comes from a privileged position, as Hart et al research focused on a group of school teachers who were already committed to devising their own ways of responding to diversity positively. I return to my earlier critique, what about practitioners, who are not averse to these ideas, submerged in pathologies of silence, how can they be made aware and assisted in cultivating positive spaces?

In attempts to challenge the construction of learning difficulty diagnostic criteria, as proposed by Goodley (2000; 2001), I drew upon MI theory, but not from a neurological/psychological perspective, but rather from a critical sociological one. I was attracted to how the theory was originally devised in opposition to generalised views of intelligence (Gardner, 1993) and how the term ‘intelligences’ was deliberately used to cause controversy and curiosity (Gardner, 2003; 2009). As ‘intelligence’ appears to be a loaded sociological phenomenon, as it can never actually be proved or disproved (see Horizon, 2011), I did not set out to test the validity of MI claims, but rather whether it (through body collages) would cause interruptions to thinking and practice.

By introducing such alternative perspectives I was able to assist in bringing this educational community together. Indeed, I was able to equalise this space, by being a bridge from the academic world, as I brought new understandings to the context, supported co-researchers to work together and to explore these ideas for themselves. I also discovered that I could be a bridge to the academic world, as I was able to utilise my skills and contacts to find opportunities where students could exhibit their work and have these contributions valued (i.e. through political activism).
Conclusion: have silences been broken?

I began this chapter by presenting an overview of the cooperative inquiry and reintroducing the research questions. Drawing upon each of these questions, I discussed the findings and what was learnt from this endeavour. This assessment begins by recognising processes that were deemed to be accessible at raising student voices, in relation to their learning preferences. I then discussed the impact that these had on practitioners and identified major factors that caused interruptions to their thinking. Not only were the specific factors of body collages and co-researcher roles effective educationally speaking, but they prompted reciprocal reflexivity; where co-researchers began to perceive themselves and others differently. Such interactive processes appeared to forge relationships of trust. I then directed my attention to recognising aspects of the inquiry that presented challenges. From the position of changing relations, I discussed how the practitioner role has evolved and moved on to assess my own role of influence.

Having examined the evidence, I argue that silences have been broken. I contribute the main causes of these to exploring alternative ways of understanding and working, and allowing these to evolve. Such processes were predicated upon relationships of trust and co-ownership. Indeed, by making familiar relationships unfamiliar in these ways, we established interdependence and meaningful processes in which to elicit student voice.
CHAPTER 9. Reflections and Implications for future actions

With the need to genuinely listen to the voices of students with learning difficulties, this thesis aims to make significant contributions to developing inclusive FE practices, particularly when responding to diversity, and progressing ‘inclusive’ disability studies.

This exploration was inspired in part from my own experiences of educational exclusion and feelings of inadequacy. I also observed, as a practitioner supporting students with purported moderate learning difficulties, that such learners are always on the peripherals of FE with deficit assumptions dictating their circumstances. Indeed, in Chapter 1, I presented how such practices are said to prohibit students from playing an active part in their educational communities, denying them a valued learner identity. These prohibitions keep them submerged, where their views are not sought, creating a culture of silence. Pathologies of silence are the consequence, as educators are influenced by both overt and covert discriminative practices, to such an extent that they fail to develop strong relationships with their students. In order to develop more inclusive ways of working and to break such silences, I adopted the view that differences needed to be positively valued, and more attention paid to increasing student participation and critically examining educational cultures.

This argument extended into Chapter 2, where it occurred to me that such actions would need to be predicated upon enabling ideologies that challenge and raise the educational status of students. It was my proposition that a social model foundation (first ideological framework) might not only challenge practitioner determinist worldviews, but might also enable students to empower themselves. As I delved into this discussion, it became apparent that people with learning difficulties are still developing ways to use emancipatory approaches. Up until now, narrative style approaches have dominated voice activities, which are usually controlled by a researcher and adding little to challenging the social dynamics of the context. Moving away from this position, I recognised that social relations and research production were instrumental to how disabling ideologies were constructed, suggesting that a self-advocacy group model/inclusive research showed more empowering promise.

In Chapter 3, I built upon arguments for collaborative approaches, drawing upon accessible processes to elicit views and invite reflection. I contended that practitioners needed to be encouraged to join in this process of struggle. This evolved into a discussion about cooperative inquiry, where
students and practitioners could work together as co-researchers, focusing upon a commonality of purpose. I proposed that a communal venturing forth may encourage practitioners to rethink, as they reflect upon their practices and the culture of their working environment. As I was instigating and overseeing this inquiry, I examined my facilitatory role and the responsibilities of introducing alternative ways of knowing (i.e. theoretical frameworks and methods) and bridging the academic and practice divide. I realised I needed to be transparent in my actions and position of influence. Indeed, for any meaningful change to happen this required more than just facilitating a community to come together, but necessitated establishing relationships of trust between different members. Thinking about how this might be achieved and returning to possible ways to value individual voices, I introduced MI theory (second ideological framework) and the central theme of student learning preferences.

Drawing upon the proposed ideological frameworks and my preliminary pilot study, I discussed how the cooperative inquiry unfolded in Chapter 4. I elaborated upon processes employed and how these were analysed during the inquiry and after leaving the college; with data being collected from co-researchers own responses to my own critical observations. Driven by an inclusive ethos and being contextually sensitive, students responses were represented with minimal interpretation. However practitioner views, in relation to interviews I conducted with them at a later stage, were scrutinised further by applying techniques from case study analysis.

In Chapters 5 and 6 I presented findings that were deemed significant by myself and co-researchers. These were collated from the overall process and themed, in relation to actions indicative of proposed ideologies, and from direct responses attained through final student interviews. As well as findings revealing accessible and empowering ways in which students advocated their learning preferences (in and beyond the college), they also identified reflective journals as impractical tools. With no data to retrieve from practitioners about their supportive roles, I realised I had to create another avenue for reflection. Whilst affirming that I had focused most of my attention on student views, it also verified the necessity of my own journal and space for reflexivity. I returned to the college to conduct further discussions with practitioners, with Chapter 7 reporting these additional and, as it transpired, fundamental findings. All the practitioners commented that certain aspects of the inquiry had caused interruptions to their thinking, and made them reappraise their supportive roles. It was observed that deficit epistemologies had been challenged, and that through further analysis
these influential factors were identified as MI theory (body collages) and co-researcher roles (equal status). As such, they felt that their supportive roles were to actively listen and give the students more time and chance.

In Chapter 8 I reviewed the cooperative inquiry, drawing particular attention to literature that necessitated central research questions and inspired courses of action. I then correlated the findings, developing a discussion about the importance of collaborative actions and how this has led to reciprocity, gain and empowerment. I argued that co-creating spaces, where everyone is involved from the beginning and their contributions valued impacted upon the educational community and contested disabling assumptions. I learnt that as an external facilitator I played a vital role in presenting alternative ways to work together, and how contextual sensitivity is essential for ideas to be co-owned and to evolve. Indeed, the mutually engaging tools of body collages and co-researcher roles enabled students to ‘speak up’ and practitioners to rethink. I referred to these processes as ‘reflexive mirrors’, because they revealed more than just the immediate reflections of students/practitioners, but encouraged them to critically examine their own reflections and the contextual circumstances constructing these. As they saw themselves and each other differently, relational dynamics were challenged, suggesting that making familiar relationships unfamiliar creates enabling conditions. I asserted that such conditions caused co-researchers to move beyond inclusive dialogue, where they communed together, to become interdependent, relying upon one another to reconstruct new understandings.

In conclusion, I summarise the main lessons learnt from this inquiry, with these corresponding to research questions. I then return to Walmsley and Johnson’s (2003) eight ‘good practice’ and ‘translating principles into practice’ guidelines and ‘utility’ (proposed by Schön, 1991a), as set out in Chapter 4, to reflect upon how useful findings have been for co-researchers. Extending this further, I discuss what has happened to co-researchers since undertaking this research. I then recognise the limitations of this inquiry, before putting forward suggestions for future research to respond to student diversity positively.
Lessons learnt

Students with learning difficulties contributing to their own learning

When examining how students can voice their learning preferences, the inquiry confirmed that processes needed to be accessible, flexible and innovative. Indeed, students were credible sources to verify whether methods were accessible, or if needing to be revised or abandoned altogether. When facilitating such enabling conditions, students were able to be consultants of their own learning, as they utilised these outlets to ‘speak up’, support one another, identify educational barriers and project their voices beyond the immediate context. They also challenged one-dimensional perceptions about their deficit homogenised status, as they reclaimed their individual intellectual identities.

Not only do I concur that student reflexivity is essential in FE, because they are young adults and therefore should be given more control over their own provision, but I also believe such processes helped them exercise their self-reflective skills. These are important for autonomy, transition and achieving curriculum aims of vocational programmes. As the students empowered themselves, practitioners and external organisations drew upon this insider information to re-evaluate assumptions and inform their levels of support.

In terms of actual processes, co-researchers reported that roles, portfolios, body collages, photo voice and creating a poster were accessible channels to share learning preferences. However, on closer inspection and taking into account practitioner critical reflection, co-researcher roles and body collages were proven to be effective catalysts for change. Both these processes relied upon collaboration, as every member performed a specific duty and engaged in reflection. In turn, relational dynamics were challenged as disabling epistemologies were thrown into question, with co-researchers looking to alternative truths. These outcomes build upon theoretical arguments that voice work is relational, necessitating communities of practice, rather than methods alone. Indeed, I argue that these processes were impacting because they provided more than just accessible avenues for unfamiliar student voices, but they also encouraged unfamiliar relationships.
**Difficulties of trying to address this issue**

The main difficulties associated with student voice were to do with practitioners making the time and showing commitment; as illustrated through my first attempt. But as I explained and concurred with others, although student consultation was claimed to be an educational priority, it was seen rather as an additional extra, where time was too valuable a resource to contribute. Analysing this further, I realised practitioners felt unsupported in their efforts, as they had no examples of good practice to follow and/or develop with students. As such, the benefits of collaborative voice work had not been witnessed first-hand to make it a worthwhile investment of time. Practitioner colleagues at Newton may very well have taken a punt with the cooperative inquiry, being disillusioned by their previous attempts and welcoming the project because I was initiating it. Whatever their reasons, time was dedicated to elicit student views and to engage in inclusive dialogue. This allocated time was also discussed and agreed upon with other group members, which seemed to have set the mutual conditions for how this inquiry would unfold.

Building upon current understandings, there will always be challenges when trying to bridge the academic and practice divide. In my efforts to raise participants to co-researcher status, I inadvertently created additional obstacles, as information was not always clearly presented nor were processes allowed to evolve in their entirety (i.e. I should have taken a step back). Moreover, despite the reflective journal being an essential tool for myself, this was not an avenue for student and practitioner reflection, as this was deemed impractical and ineffectual. Additionally, journals, like portfolios, required isolated reflection and were in danger of practitioner manipulation and regress ing relations. As the findings suggest, effective processes were those that were tactile and encouraged partnership.

**Roles of practitioners**

It has been suggested that practitioners may be influenced by collaborative cultures, to the extent where they re-evaluate their supportive roles. Based upon the evidence of this inquiry, I would strongly agree. I observed that practitioner roles changed from supporting students with moderate learning difficulties to facilitating opportunities for student colleagues, who had been marginalised. Practitioners moved away from deficit assumptions to perceiving the students as valuable insider
consultants, who could advise them on creating more enabling environments. In this sense, the
students were no longer seen as being the problem, but were rather the problem solvers.

By acknowledging disabling infrastructures, practitioners realised that specialist supporter roles were
redundant and perpetuated hegemony, so they consciously adapted these to intermediary roles
instead. They felt that intermediary roles required them to actively listen and to examine learner
potential, rather than determining capabilities based upon their limited observations. The students felt
that such roles should serve to bridge the college to their local communities, helping them to be
autonomous and to explore job opportunities.

It seemed intermediary responsibilities were established through relationships of trust and engaging
in reflexive reciprocity. Although practitioner motivations were influenced by unorthodox ideologies,
encouraging them to see alternative possibilities, they were also driven by educational effectiveness.
Indeed, unlike other educational initiatives or imposed techniques from external researchers, where
practitioners are expected to continue using these because they are equitable, I found that they
continued using processes, because they were also deemed to be beneficial. For example, by
students ‘speaking up’ practitioners learnt about their intellectual strengths and began to explore
ways in which these could be developed and utilised; thereby meeting curriculum objectives. It was
therefore, in practitioners and students interests for them to continue facilitating such opportunities.

Role of a facilitator

The inquiry confirmed that a facilitator/critical friend can play a vital role in forging alliances and
establishing relationships of trust between different members of an educational community. In
agreement with earlier views, by introducing alternative ways of understanding this cultivated an
enabling space. With an outsider perspective, I recognised that it was my responsibility to introduce
the political and unconventional ideologies of the social model of disability and MI theory. Not only did
I invite co-researchers to consider these ideas, but they were encouraged to explore these for
themselves and consider outcomes against existing ways of knowing. It seemed these processes
aided co-researchers to see each other differently, as they became interdependent; relying upon one
another to achieve their own objectives.

As well as attempting to equalise space, I also saw it as my role to be transparent in how I was
influencing the context and applied a sense of vulnerability to my reporting. I concur with others that
reflexivity is an essential element for inclusive research, as this allowed me to scrutinise findings and constantly reposition myself. I learnt from reflecting upon my journal entries that I was, at times, reproducing hegemony and under valuing the voices of practitioners. As such, I was able to respond to these discrepancies and explore other possibilities. I argue that my reflective journal was an important tool, as this allowed me to constantly nurture collaborative relationships.

Reflections about the inquiry

Returning to the eight ‘good practice’ and ‘translating principles into practice’ guidelines, as well as the contextual principle of ‘utility’, I analyse my facilitatory influence, how inclusive outcomes have been and assess the impact of the overall inquiry.

1. Research must address issues which really matter to people with learning difficulties, and which ultimately leads to improved lives for them

Although I introduced the central theme of student learning preferences this was an issue that was pertinent to the students involved. They utilised this focus to not only express their learning preferences, but to empower themselves as they led the agenda and raised other important issues e.g. Frank advocating that he wanted to live independently. From these findings, students engaged in reflective discussions with practitioners, exhibited work at conferences and shared personal insights with family, carers and other external agencies during their end of year presentations. All these different interactions gave them platforms in which to ‘speak up’ and assert their authority. As such, they have directed changes in their lives, both as a student at college and as a member of their local community.

2. Research must access and represent their views and experiences

The whole ethos of this inquiry was about empowering and representing their views. However, this was not from a deficit present perspective, but rather from one of possibility and drawing upon numerous ways in which to express these. It was felt that experiential accounts were not liberating enough, as students would be confined to the context and where I would be holding the majority of the power. Cooperative processes were introduced to move away from traditional narrative approaches, so that students could co-own the research process and communicate through whatever means deemed accessible. Breaking silences is about genuinely listening to these voices and
creating enabling conditions where students could seize opportunities to ‘speak up’. I was also meticulous in how I transcribed and represented these views (and those of practitioners), as I tried to apply minimal editing and interpretations.

3. People with learning difficulties need to be treated with respect by the research community

Throughout this process I have endeavored to treat all co-researchers with respect, perceiving them as equal research partners, who needed to be consulted and kept informed at every stage. Although abiding by ethical codes of practice to respect their confidentiality I had intended not to disclose their identities, but co-researchers stated that they wanted these to be made known to the research community. Whilst creating our poster, the students were adamant that they wanted their names and pictures on display, keen for others to acknowledge their researcher status. It seemed full disclosure was an empowering experience, as though the students were quite literally emerging from silences and making others aware of their voice/s.

This was further demonstrated when we gave a presentation at another conference, where few delegates attended our session, due to another well known disability activist speaking at the same time. I naively thought that despite the timetable clash, we would have a larger audience than we did, as we were the only learning difficulty researchers speaking and to draw upon inquiry based approaches. When reviewing the experience the following week, co-researchers commented that they were disappointed by so few people showing an interest. Thinking about ways forward, both Frank and Lorraine suggested that we write a letter of complaint (as an e-mail) to the conference organisers. Co-researchers then relayed back to me what they wanted to include in this e-mail. We then received an apology a few days later. I draw upon this experience for two reasons: Firstly, researchers with learning difficulties are still not given the same amount of respect as academics and activists with physical impairments in British disability studies. Secondly, by us and others (e.g. Carlisle research co-op) making our presence known and challenging these dynamics the disability research community will have to acknowledge that disability issues are just as (if not more) imperative. Indeed, as well as presenting at conferences and seminars, co-researchers and I have also taught undergraduate students and have started to publish our findings. This work is co-authored, or if from my point of view, acknowledges their invaluable contributions (see Appendix 1: Cooperative publications and conference presentations).
4. Those involved in the research should have a commitment to social change arising from it

It is evident from collective findings that everyone has been committed to this inquiry. From exploring methods to engaging in collaborative reflective dialogue the aim was to listen to student views, address disabling barriers and implement learning preferences. Although practical changes have been observed in the immediate context e.g. having regular reflective discussions, these have also transcended into other organisations working closely with the college. For example, Katherine and Laura, from a supportive employment agency, were able to build upon these findings. Indeed, they felt that students had learnt essential reflective skills, which not only made them more astute about what they wanted to do in the future, but also made Katherine and Laura’s transition into work role a lot easier. The following segment of transcript was taken from a brief conversation I had with them, just after Kavita and Shaffia had given their presentations:

*Katherine:* *Obviously, understandings taking place.*

*Me:* *Yeah.*

*Laura:* *Yeah.*

*Katherine:* *You know in order, because we get a lot don’t we? ‘Why do you like that?’ [Laura: ‘I don’t know’] ‘I can’t remember’.*

*Me:* *Hum.*

*Katherine:* *Whereas, if they see an image and go ‘oh yeah, I know I didn’t like that, because it was too busy’, ‘I didn’t like walking next to’, you know, ‘too close to the road’ or whatever.*

*Me:* *Er hum.*

*Katherine:* *It obviously means they’ve understood every single aspect of it haven’t they?*

Additionally, Rachel, from the Connexions service had attended Lee and James’s presentations and was keen to learn more about the body collage method. Although having experience with facilitating person-centred reviews, Rachel explained that these would often be led by well intentioned others, rather than the student themselves. However, she felt that the body collage activity would be useful,
believing this to be both emancipatory and informative. Rachel expressed an interest to explore and develop this process further.

5. There must be a commitment to taking people’s words seriously

I have taken what co-researchers have voiced to me and the rest of the group as authentic, accepting their responses without question. Walmsley and Johnson (2003) argue that a genuinely committed ally has no need for triangulation and other checks. However, I had intended to hold student validation sessions shortly after the photo voice task, but decided against these as the students validated their pictures when designing the poster. Also, I felt the reflective meetings gave the students plenty of opportunities to elaborate upon findings, and allowed me to cross-check my observations with their feedback. Triangulation, in this sense, was used to understand the students’ points of view and invite further dialogue with practitioner colleagues. In terms of how practitioners have responded, I noticed they have been consciously trying not to speak for the students.

6. The research should be undertaken with the aims of empowering those involved in it

Built upon emancipatory foundations, drawing upon social model and MI theories, empowerment has been the central focus of this inquiry. As such, it should be evaluated based upon evidence of students ‘speaking up’, recognising disabling barriers - which led to more enabling learning environments, challenging one-dimensional views about their intellectual capabilities and whether these outcomes have impacted upon direct practice and deficit epistemologies.

7. Research should be viewed as a holistic nature, concerned not to fragment the individual, but rather to focus on freeing their voices

All the processes, with the exception of my observations, sought to represent the students’ voices in full. This was the main reason why a variety of methods where explored, as students needed to explore ways in which they could free themselves and commune with practitioners. However, my interpretations of what was significant to include and how these findings were depicted cannot be overlooked; as I too was a research instrument (Merriam, 2002b).
8. The research should involve self-reflection by all those taking part, especially the researcher as it pertains to their position

Being a cooperative inquiry, participants were both co-researchers and co-subjects engaging in action and reflection to review findings (Reason, 1998; Heron and Reason, 2007). The students reflected upon their learner status and preferences, drawing upon a variety of means to explore these further and raise their conscientisation (Freire, 1972). However, practitioners were limited to reflective journals, which proved to be too impractical to maintain. As their input was vital to determining whether collaborative actions would continue to be used to address student voice their perspectives needed to be sought.

In order to monitor my role, as it pertained to matters of reflexivity and reactivity, I kept a weekly reflective journal. This log made me more critically aware, as I observed during training sessions and other cycle meetings that I would sometimes dominate processes and draw upon inaccessible materials. My journal became an essential guide, allowing me to constantly appraise my facilitatory position and the reflective tools made available to other co-researchers. It was due to these detailed findings that I was able to recognise that I had undervalued the roles of practitioners, which caused me to interview them shortly after the inquiry had finished.

Utility

I would argue that the overall inquiry has been useful to practitioners, as it has enabled them to learn and engage in reflective practices; both with students and each other. Practitioners commented that reflective discussions were valuable to their practice, as they realised that students could participate in abstract dialogue, make decisions and assert their opinions.

Not only did reflexive mirrors create committed spaces, where students became reflective learners and practitioners active listeners, but mutual relationships of trust were established. These new found relations helped cultivate an open environment, where students shared more than just their learning preferences e.g. Lee discussed how his family did not listen to him.

In terms of the longevity of these processes, these are all still being used, but in ways that are conducive to everyday practices. For example, the body collage method now serves as an induction tool, presented to new students at the start of the academic year and re-assessed annually.
Researcher roles have evolved into roles of responsibility, where each person volunteers to perform a specific task each term, with these being displayed as a chart on the wall. Rather than scheduled meetings, practitioners facilitate reflective discussions (usually in the afternoons), where students are asked to share their thoughts about different activities that they have been engaged in. Photo voice is now about students capturing theirs and others progress, using the camera as and when they want to, rather than when invited to do so.

From these practitioner responses, it seems cooperative ways of working have had a lasting impact as there is a willingness to continue investing time and commitment, as they are achieving desirable outcomes.

**What of fellow co-researchers?**

As this inquiry was predicated upon emancipatory principles and thus driven by transformative aims, it is essential to know what has happened to co-researchers since undertaking this research. In terms of the context, as I have already explained, certain approaches are still being used. All the students have since left the course and all, but one, of the practitioners still work at the college.

**Students:**

Shaffia Ahmed works part-time at Sainsbury’s (in the cafeteria) and really enjoys her job. This placement was organised by Katherine and Laura, through supported employment. Shaffia was adamant during the inquiry that she wanted to work here, or in a bakery. Although she was initially apprehensive about her working conditions, she is supported by other employees and catches a taxi to and from work.

Frank Lee stayed on at the college, but transferred to another programme that supports him working in a hospital cafeteria. Frank is also doing voluntary work one day a week for a community organisation, involved in a mentoring research project through a disability charity, and is part of the Young People’s Parliament.

Kavita Lunj had planned to work in a garden centre or nursery, with these being organised through Katherine and Laura, but unfortunately the work placements were not hiring at the time. She is still in the process of finding work. At present, Kavita supports her parents with their family run business.
Lee Noonan worked in the college gym for awhile, which was one of our cooperative goals, and was an experience he really enjoyed. As he expressed a desire to continue learning about photography he is now involved in an arts based project where he uses cameras and develops film. Lee is also doing the same voluntary work as Frank and works with another supported employment agency, where he is learning about how to travel independently.

James Ward is on the same college programme as Frank, where he is being supported to work in a hospital. He is currently deciding what he wants to do, either a porter or someone who inputs data into a computer.

Practitioners:

Lorraine Pugh was asked by Janet (curriculum manager) to oversee student voice initiatives for the department. This responsibility involves her sharing ideas and supporting other practitioners, spread over four campuses. Lorraine explained that this came about through Janet attending the student presentations and wanting other colleagues to learn from these practices.

Tracey Burns and Claudine Willis still work on the programme and continue to support Lorraine with student voice work.

Mark Atherton worked on the programme for another year, but has since retired.

What is evident from these overall findings and individual outcomes was that silences were broken, as students visibly empowered themselves and are still asserting their views. Likewise, practitioners critically addressed their disabling practices and are now facilitating more opportunities and sharing these developments with other colleagues. Although this inquiry was felt to be beneficial, it is also imperative to consider its limitations.

Limitations of this inquiry

When critically reflecting upon some of the limitations of this research, it is important to acknowledge that this was conducted within a specific context and exclusively with students described to have moderate learning difficulties. As such, it could be argued that processes were linked to myself and/or the college and would therefore not be transferable. Also, other students considered to be marginalised (in accordance with Chapter 1) were not included, suggesting that applying a principled
approach for all learners is still a research aspiration. By working exclusively with students with learning difficulties, it could be said that this was a homogenising inquiry, rather than one that was responding to diversity.

Although these are salient points, I feel it is important to reiterate that students with learning difficulties are identified as being submerged in a culture of silence, with pathologies of silence preserving such disabling conditions. With this in mind, this inquiry was merely a starting place to determine what processes would be accessible for them to empower themselves, with these acting as springboards to explore with other students. In this sense, learning difficulty issues were the stimulus, encouraging possibilities that could reach out to a range of different learners. With this in mind, in the following section I propose possible ways to respond to learner diversity positively.

**Responding to diversity positively: future research**

Drawing upon lessons learnt, I discuss how inquiry findings could be explored to advance further research responding to diversity positively, particularly students on the margins of education.

**Applying a social model of intellectual impairment**

Examining the influential perspectives upon which these processes were inspired, I argue that the social model of disability is an effective tool for FE. Indeed, other research projects and school resources have encouraged practitioners to consider this approach. However, the onus has mostly been on practitioners, rather than informing students about ways in which they might empower themselves. For students with purported learning difficulties, exploring social model approaches is still in its infancy, as further research needs to address educational self-advocacy. I would even go so far as to say, that because the social model is a contextual principle it is more applicable to an educational setting, as this subculture creates and identifies learning disabled students.

Indeed, it is time to expose these phenomena, by challenging the value constructions (boundaries) that sustain learning disability characteristics. While other researchers have started to explore this through philosophical debate, I contend that such relational oppression can only really be dealt with in practice and through collaborative endeavours. As with the social model, alternative understandings about intelligence can enable a multi-dimensional replica of reality to be conceptualised. MI, used from a critical sociological position, has evidently, become an ally to
constructing a social model of intellectual impairment. However, follow up research would need to explore this further, particularly as a heuristic device to challenge deficit epistemologies and as a means to reclaim intellectual identities.

**Future roles of facilitators**

I believe a facilitator can play an essential role in bringing an educational community together and encouraging members to consider alternative truths. Up until this inquiry, it seemed external educational researchers were somewhat wary of introducing models/theories into a context, conscious of practitioner distrust towards academic input and the utility/longevity of such perspectives. Although I agree that facilitators should not be devising recipes and imposing ideas they can, however, bring external viewpoints, which can invigorate understandings and possibilities. But it is imperative that these viewpoints turn into actions, so that a community can assess whether these alternative ways of knowing add any value to their existing practices. This is why defining the role of a facilitator from the outset is so important, as other participants know what their contributions will be. Indeed, facilitators must assist in applications, allowing these to evolve and invite critical reflection about their employment and utility. They must be open to criticism and be flexible about how an ideology can be implemented.

Once an ideology has evolved into a workable process/method, they need to step back, gradually withdrawing their power and influence, and hand these controls over to other participants; as illustrated in *Box 9.1 Timeline of power and influence*. I believe this is a crucial phase, as facilitators must allow processes to be co-owned by a community, to the extent where their role becomes redundant. By way of an example, one of the reasons why the body collage method was so effective was that it was allowed to evolve, incorporating everyone’s suggestions, to become an accessible and communal resource. As such, I no longer oversee this method, as practitioners now facilitate this collaborative space. In fact, they have developed this even further, where student outlines are achieved by them standing against the wall, rather than laying on the floor; as it was felt that this was less invasive and easier for students with mobility difficulties.
As well as introducing alternative worldviews, a facilitator can aid in equalising space, where practitioners and students can draw upon dialogical tools together. As such, I believe a fundamental responsibility is to assist participants to challenge relational dynamics by facilitating unfamiliar working relationships.

**Developing reflexive mirrors**

Unfamiliar relationships are likely to be achieved through the identified reflexive mirrors of co-researcher roles and/or body collages, or by devising other processes that can prompt reciprocal reflexivity. What is essential is that such processes are mutually engaging, focusing upon a common interest, and stimulating critical reflection.

Reflexive mirrors may not only serve to bring people closer together, but they may also help them become a critically aware and active community. As this inquiry illustrated, co-researcher roles and body collages encouraged collaborative responsibility, confronting problems (whether physical or attitudinal) together and looking to each other for solutions. As indeed I found, such actions are likely to lead to Interdependence and relationships of trust, as communities become inquiring and creative.
In this way, reflexive mirrors act as catalysts, encouraging participants to continually address immediate barriers and wider societal prejudices.

Conclusion

My thesis began by acknowledging that students with learning difficulties are submerged in a culture of silence, where they are homogenised as a deficit category and thus seen in a one-dimensional way. Such a disabling culture is sustained by pathologies of silence, where educators are likewise submerged and in turn prevented from seeking student views and developing meaningful relationships with them. In an attempt to break such silences, I proposed that alternative ideological frameworks might deconstruct the educational context and reconstruct understandings that value and respond to learner diversity positively. Drawing upon student voice through collaboration, I invited an educational community to work together and explore the common theme of student learning preferences through a variety of intertwining processes.

Findings confirmed that voice work is indeed a collaborative responsibility, prompting empowering actions with assertions being listened to and acted upon without recourse. It would seem that by continuing to focus on methods alone we are overlooking contextual sensitivity and tacit knowledge, and in danger of being lulled into a false sense of inclusive security. Rather, and what this thesis has contributed, more attention needs to be on co-creating processes that can act as catalysts to ignite reciprocal relationships between students and practitioners. Such mutually engaging tools can challenge relational dynamics and disabling epistemologies, which can in turn break silences.

As such, it would seem FE communities require more than just guidelines to facilitate such actions. They need tangible examples (e.g. like those found in the body of this work) and the support of a critical friend to assist them in exploring and examining processes further. I believe that it is only when the different components of, and spaces for voice, a valued learner identity, and critical reflection come together that genuine inclusive provision can be developed for students with learning difficulties and, indeed, other marginalised learners.
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APPENDIX 1. Cooperative publications and conference presentations

Publications:


Conference presentations:

‘Breaking the silence: listening to the voices of students with learning difficulties’ delivered at the Learning Disabilities Research Conference, The University of Manchester, 23rd April 2010.

‘Breaking the silence: listening to the voices of students with learning difficulties’ delivered at the Forum of Research with Children and Young People (FORC), The University of Manchester, 15th October 2009.

‘Developing a cooperative approach within further education to empower students with learning difficulties and explore more inclusive ways of working’ – Poster presentation, The Faculty of Humanities in association with The Manchester Museum: The Researcher Showcase 2009, The University of Manchester, 11th July 2009.
‘Developing a cooperative approach within further education to empower students with learning difficulties and explore more inclusive ways of working’ delivered at School of Education Student Research conference, The University of Manchester, 30th June 2009.

‘Developing a cooperative approach within further education to empower students with learning difficulties and explore more inclusive ways of working’ delivered at Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Tokyo (MMU-Todai): Disability and the Economy: creating a society for all conference, 29-30th April 2009.

‘Developing a cooperative approach within further education to empower students with learning difficulties and explore more inclusive ways of working’ – Poster presentation, Centre for Enquiry Based Learning (CEEBL): student voice conference, The University of Manchester, 25th March 2009.
APPENDIX 2. Identifying central themes from final interview data

Student analysis:

Kavita

- Student portfolios
  - What worked well?
  - Co-researcher roles
  - What emerged?
  - Wants to do more research
  - Enjoy doing research
  - Only just scratched the surface

James

- Practitioners trust him
- Self-reflective
- Treat him like an adult
- Practitioners have a better understanding
- What emerged?
  - Likes filming
  - Co-researcher roles
  - Looking for stuff on the computer
  - Student portfolios
Frank

What did not work so well?
- Journals
  - Kept forgetting
  - Time restrictions
  - Had another diary
- Body collages
- Photo voice

What worked well?
- What emerged?
- Practitioners have a better understanding
- Cooperative process
  - Sociable person
  - Grown in confidence
- Listening
  - Time and chance
- Enjoyed exhibiting research findings
- Wants to do more research
- Student portfolios
Practitioner analysis:

Mark

What worked well?
Body collages
Cooperative process
Challenges
Getting to know you
Poster
As individual learners
Meetings - too academic

Tracey

What worked well?
Practical application
Photo voice
Body collages
Student changes
Practitioners prompting students
Student confusion

What did not work so well?
Time restraints

Getting to know you
Speaking out

Progressing research into practice
Journals
Student portfolios

Induction tool for new students

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APPENDIX 3. Practitioner interview analysis

Tracey

Social model of disability
Introductory meetings
Body colleges
Factors
Intelligences
Co-researcher roles
Roles of responsibility
Student independence
Questioning existing assumptions
Equal status
Supportive roles
Time and chance
Implementing this into practice
Awareness of student skills
Focusing upon student strengths rather than deficits
The next step?
Mark, Lorraine and Tracey

Challenges
- Meetings too long
- Getting to know you
- Questioning existing assumptions
- Intelligences
- Future prospects

Cooperative process
- Journals
- Cooperative process
- Working reflective with the students

Student confidence
- Student portfolios
- Listening
- Time and chance
- Staff confidence
- Explore and experience

Equal status
- Students feeling empowered
- Student self-reflective skills
- Student ownership

Meetings too long
- Reflection is needed but through alternative means
- Recognising diversity
- Important for both students and practitioners

Getting to know you
- Focusing open student strengths rather than deficits
- Value what is being said
- Time and chance
- Important for both students and practitioners

Questioning existing assumptions
- Students feeling empowered
- Prerequisites eager to put students in the driving seat
- Students more focused
- Essential to the learning experience

Factors
- Important for both students and practitioners
- Explore and experience
- Staff confidence
- Listening
- Time and chance

Intelligences
- Important for both students and practitioners
- Explore and experience
- Staff confidence
- Listening
- Time and chance

Future prospects
- Important for both students and practitioners
- Explore and experience
- Staff confidence
- Listening
- Time and chance

Cooperative process
- Journals
- Cooperative process
- Working reflective with the students

Student confidence
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- Listening
- Time and chance
- Staff confidence
- Explore and experience

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- Students feeling empowered
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- Student ownership

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