

JUDE MACARTHUR, ANNE-MARIE MCILROY  
AND TEGAN HOWARD

## 7. “WHAT MADE SCHOOL SO GOOD?”

### INTRODUCTION

In her recent book on children’s rights, the late Emeritus Professor Anne Smith wrote that she was looking for “... a change in attitudes, perceptions, and ways of interacting with children” (p. 2). Anne felt that the idea that children and young people have rights at school was still not well understood. She argued that an acceptance of children’s and young people’s rights was important, that this acknowledgement makes a difference to the kind of lives that children and young people can lead at school and in the community. Rights in education are an important area of focus in this book.

The second key area of interest in this book is inclusive education. Florian, Young, and Rouse (2010) suggest that if we are to understand how schools can be good places for all students, where their presence, participation and learning is enhanced, then research needs to help us explore and learn from schools that are working in innovative and effective ways. Inclusion is, in part, about the way in which schools support all students to be active participants in their school community. Participation is a fundamental human right, and it is this right that Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is concerned with (United Nations, 1989). Connecting rights with inclusion, we agree with Michael Freeman (2007) that when schools support young people’s rights, they support young people to fully participate – students can make their own decisions and make their own lives, rather than having their lives made for them.

Tegan, an author of this chapter, has a positive story to tell about her secondary school experience. Anne Marie knew Tegan well, having worked with her and her teachers and her family throughout her primary and secondary schooling. Anne Marie’s position as a specialist teacher was funded through the Ongoing Resourcing Scheme (ORS), which “...provides support for students with the highest level of need for special education to join in and learn alongside other students at school” (Ministry of Education, 2017). Both Jude and Anne Marie worked as researchers in the field of education. The three of us agreed that Tegan’s experience provided an opportunity to share knowledge about what makes secondary schools inclusive – we wanted to explore the factors that made school a good place for Tegan, looking in particular at aspects of school culture and teaching practice. In doing this we hoped to honour the Salamanca Statement by contributing to a better understanding

of how schools can consider the diversity of young people's experiences and work towards being places that are for all students. We also hoped to honour the UNCRC by raising awareness of how its provisions can be applied in education in the spirit in which it was first drafted (Lundy, 2007). Children and young people have rights to receive and give information, and to take part in decision-making processes that affect them. Behind this right to be heard is an assumption that children and young people are resilient and capable, and can form their own views. We wondered how this right was addressed at Tegan's school, and we were interested in exploring this question through research processes that promote Tegan as a young researcher thereby enhancing her voice in research.

When we began recording this story together, Tegan had recently finished school, she had two part time jobs, a busy social life, and she was about to leave home to move into her own flat. Tegan joined us as a co-researcher; we have written this chapter and explained its content to Tegan so that she could agree that it told her story accurately. The chapter explores Tegan's successful experience in a New Zealand secondary school and her subsequent positive transition into a busy working adult life. More specifically it considers Tegan's and her teachers' perspectives on what made school so good; the active involvement of Tegan in the research process, and how these processes can inform a better understanding of inclusive school cultures and teaching practices that enhance disabled students' life at school and beyond.

#### HOW WE DID THE RESEARCH

The project was reviewed by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee. Pseudonyms have been used for the school and teachers participating in the study, Tegan has chosen, as a co-researcher, to keep her own name. This is an affirmative project that celebrates Miro High School's progress as it works towards inclusion.

Lundy (2007) has challenged both practitioners and researchers to consider the implications of Article 12, reminding them that seeking children's and young people's 'Voice' is "not enough" (p. 927). In response to Lundy's challenge, we wanted to ensure that Tegan had the support she needed to say what school was like for her, and that there was an audience who would listen to her views, take them seriously, and act upon them in empowering ways. The research needed to be an enjoyable experience for Tegan, where she could actively participate and readily share her views with us about what it was that made school so good. Most importantly, in terms of authenticity, we sought an approach to data collection and analysis that would authentically represent Tegan's views alongside those of her teachers (Cook, 2011; Kelly, 2007).

Qualitative approaches to research, including interviewing (Kelly, 2007) and the use of methodologies such as photovoice (Obrusnikova & Cavalier, 2011) provide a level of flexibility leading to creative and responsive methodological approaches for consulting with children and young people with disabilities. Responsive approaches