

The Language of Inclusion and its Impact on the Leadership of Equity within Scottish Secondary Schools

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Abstract

Language and power are inextricably linked, and our use of language influences our attitudes, beliefs and values as human beings. This study focuses on how representations of inclusion frame our collective understanding of the term. It uses Critical Discourse Analysis to analyse how inclusion is represented in key Scottish policies, media headline representations and through professional association discourse. These different representations contribute to a variance in understanding and the narrative within education about inclusion. Empirical research was undertaken with head teachers in a case study local authority to consider how these representations feature within their settings, and examine any impact on the leadership of equity.

Ultimately, language impacts on our attitudes and collective understanding about inclusion. This paper considers how varying attitudes potentially undermine the leadership of equity within secondary schools.

Keywords: language of inclusion, power, leadership of equity

Introduction

There is international prominence for the development of inclusion as an inherently important feature of education (Ainscow, 2020; Freire, 1970; Macleod, 2014). In Scotland, inclusion has been influenced and developed within the context of various legislative and national policy drivers, and a discrete education system has been embedded in Scots Law since 1696. There is a broad definition of *additional support needs* (ASN) in Scotland: support given to children which would be perceived as being different to what is generally provided to young people of the same age (Scottish Parliament, 2004). In Scotland, the circumstances giving rise to ASN are wide-ranging: examples are on the grounds of disability, health, learning environment, family circumstances and social and emotional needs. In 2023 37% of Scotland's school children were described as having an ASN (Scottish Government, 2023a).

School leadership in the post-pandemic context has changed and, arguably, the importance of social justice has gained moral impetus. The impact of the pandemic has been substantial: on Scottish society; on the particular contexts in which schools serve; on wellbeing generally (McCluskey et al., 2023). The imperative to consider how to include all young people has therefore intensified. A

challenge for headteachers is leading equity within increasingly challenging and charged circumstances.

Language around inclusion has developed over this time too, with terms such as *inclusion*, *equity* and *social justice* being used almost interchangeably. These terms are used too within the context of policy, research, and influential reports, which collectively shape the development of practice in reality. Groups who commentate and lobby on educational matters also use these terms, such as the media and professional associations - powerful, influential voices within the field (Brown & Munn, 2008).

Language is used to frame our understanding of the world around us; as humans, we use language to define and articulate beliefs (Fairclough, 2001). A tenet of the teaching profession is social justice, but there are deep ethical issues when considering the practice of inclusion/ social justice/ equity in Scottish education. Different voices about inclusion are present in the public consciousness, ranging from the voice of policy, to language in the media and that used by professional associations. Some of these voices become more amplified than others and are hugely influential to the narrative.

The leadership of equity can be undermined by the representations of inclusion that surround and influence the schools in which we lead (Mowat, 2023). The variance of voices on inclusion lead to the co-construction of a narrative that is shared, but not impartial. Instead, it is imbued with emotive language which contributes to polarisation and further inequity. Yet, as a profession headteachers work towards a 2030 UNESCO goal of ensuring equitable and inclusive education for all which promotes lifelong learning opportunities (UNESCO, 2015). Both globally and more specifically in Scotland, there is a tension between the enactment of inclusion policy and the pervasive narrative which impacts headteachers. The way that language shapes our understanding of inclusion is paramount.

Literature Review

The key purpose of the literature review is to consider what is known about language and power relationships from the field of linguistics, and to consider what is already known about how language of inclusion is represented within educational writing.

The Sociology of Language

As human beings, we interpret the world through language (Labov, 1971) and humans' attitudes towards topics can be influenced by the specific language used. Attitudinal differences lead to definitions being co-created, and have the latent potential to be difficult as, if misinterpretations take hold in collective understanding, it can undermine the original intention. Although it is often assumed that the language of a particular community can for all practical purposes be regarded as invariant across that community (Fairclough, 2001), this is not true for education. Society as a whole has an interest in education due to its reach. An example of the field of knowledge not being fixed is the significant development in the area of cognitive psychology, adverse childhood experiences (ACES) and trauma (Harris, 2018; Maté, 2011).

Fairclough (2001) positions language as both discourse and social practice. Where the ideological power stems from in education is complicated, as what is stated in policy is impacted, as this study shows, by other powerful voices which are heard by stakeholders. Humes (2000) explores the conflictual, class-bound and power-driven nature of language: words have meaning in a social context. What becomes therefore believed about inclusion has been influenced by the differing voices that have been heard.

Leadership for Equity

What characterises Scotland's inclusion policy is its focus on relationships rather than discipline (Macleod, 2014). However, Ainscow (2020) states that policy is made at all levels of the education system, including crucially the school and classroom levels. Indeed, through the act of teaching, teachers are the policymakers (Ainscow, 2020). Teachers' attitudes and beliefs, therefore, are hugely important in advancing inclusion.

Education is a fundamental aspect of society; access to education is recognised internationally as a human right (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). As Ainscow (2020) acknowledges, a culture of inclusion requires a shared set of values, beliefs and assumptions at policy (both national and local) and school level, which can be problematic.

Internationally, social cohesion is regarded as an important global policy agenda item amid debate about multi-culturalism, immigration and national security as well as fears of a lessening of trust in society and agreed values (Brown & Munn, 2008). However, what is of particular challenge in Scottish education is that the culture for inclusion stretches beyond those involved in day-to-day life at school; it affects all within society. There are other groups who have powerful and influential voices, such as professional associations and the media. It is not a prerequisite that these groups necessarily have the same values, beliefs and assumptions as policy-writers, which can lead to a tension in the interpretation of inclusive practice, and offers a challenge to the leadership of equity for school leaders.

A Moral Imperative

Leadership of equity is centrally important in Scottish schools. A sense of urgency to lead for equity is described by Lash and Sanchez (2022). They acknowledge that the global issues of climate change, racial injustice, the impact of Covid-19 pandemic and economic inequality necessitate such leadership. Yet there are systemic issues such as frameworks in existence which may limit how social justice functions, or, at worst, enacts and perpetuates disadvantage or incidences of injustice (Brown & Mercieca, 2024).

It is acknowledged internationally that headteachers set the tone for the culture of equity and inclusion (Lash & Sanchez, 2022). Lash and Sanchez (2022) also refer to a persistent opportunity gap between groups of students, a theme which is echoed in Scottish Government's stated desire to close the poverty-related attainment gap (Scottish Government, 2021).

What Can Become Lost in this Discourse?

Much has been written about moral purpose and its close relationship with school leadership (Mowat, 2018; Noddings, 2016). However, nuance exists in this space as education systems are subject to audit and competition (Chapman & Ainscow, 2021; Kerr & Ainscow, 2022), and such systems further advantage those benefiting from financial and social advantage (Harris et al., 2006).

Ainscow (2020) highlights the importance of the attitudes, beliefs and actions of adults in changing outcomes for vulnerable learners as negative assumptions can exist, based on certain groups of learners' capabilities and behaviours. Attitude towards inclusion is a key factor in its success or otherwise within a school context (Boyle et al., 2013).

Critical awareness is also based on a vision of a more just future (Lash & Sanchez, 2022). Discourse in policy must be explored in order to examine its links with social justice.

Methodology

This research has its origin in the post-structuralist paradigm, and also draws upon a constructivist paradigm. Meaning is not universal or predictable, but dynamic and context-dependent. The language of policy writing does not reflect an already-given social reality. Education means different things to different strata of society, depending on their own positioning with education. Therefore, the language of policy, which influences the practice of educators and, by extension, the experience of education users and stakeholders, constitutes social reality.

The selected methods for this study involved deconstruction of text, specifically selected policy from Scottish education, to decode intended meaning and application. It involved analysis of polyvocal, reflexive texts (Hatch, 2023) and has its basis in reflexive research which entails systematic and critical enquiry into others' writings (Basse, 1999). It is therefore evaluative research. Its aim is to advance knowledge through its search for deep meaning through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the language used in key Scottish education policy.

Research Questions

This study had three research questions, which are explained below:

1. **How is the language of inclusion represented within current selected Scottish educational policy?**

This research considered three pieces of current Scottish educational policy and one report:

- *Presumption to Provide Education in a Mainstream Setting: Guidance* (Scottish Government, 2019)
- *Included, Engaged and Involved Part 2: Preventing and Managing School Exclusions* (Scottish Government, 2017)
- *National Framework for Inclusion, 3rd edition* (Scottish Universities Inclusion Group, 2023)
- *Behaviour in Scottish Schools* report. The Scottish Centre for Social Research were commissioned by the Scottish Government (2023b)

The research considered texts separately and as a totality. It examined how inclusion is represented through these individual texts, and also what collective messages about inclusion can be taken.

2. **How is the language of inclusion represented in other sources of media with a wider reach than policy?**

The research examines language about inclusion in the following media contexts:

- Times Educational Supplement (TES)
- The Herald
- The Scotsman
- Daily Record
- BBC Scotland
- Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS)
- National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT)

These sources represent a cross-section of voice in the media and have a reach that includes teachers (this is the intended audience of TES) as well as a wider societal reach, which includes both teachers and any stakeholders in education.

3. How do the various representations of inclusion impact on headteachers' experience of the leadership of equity within their contexts?

Through discussion in two focus groups, this research engaged with a range of headteachers in one Scottish local authority to explore how the representations of inclusion impacted on their experience of the leadership of equity within their schools. In the Findings section, the headteachers are referred to as HT1, HT2 etc.

Methods and Positionality

The author used Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) approach to data analysis. In the post-structuralist paradigm, there is a tacit understanding that the researcher is also part of the world being researched. As a headteacher who is also a researcher, the researcher is therefore a policy enactor. RTA was selected due to the positionality of the researcher as Braun and Clarke (2022) flip the notion of researcher bias to advocate it as a strength.

This CDA reflects the fact that the context in which policy exists is also important. Therefore, the methods also included a critical discourse analysis of contextual representation of Scottish education within a selection of printed media, providing a basis to give a comparison.

Decision to Use Focus Groups

Focus groups were selected as the method, as the nature of the research focus is about language, and a strength of focus groups is the possibility of co-construction of meaning during the discussion (Gibbs, 2012). The impact on the leadership of equity of different voices around inclusion has not previously captured the voice of Scottish headteachers in research, which was a further justification for this empirical study.

There were two focus groups which in itself was an ethical decision to allow for comparison of content and conclusions to be drawn across more than one group of people (Onwuegbuzie, 2009). Purposive sampling was used in this research, where a small group of participants was selected to represent the whole (Rai & Thapa, 2015).

The headteachers who made up the focus groups were not homogenous; there were variations with respect to gender, denominational/non-denominational expertise, age, length of service as headteacher, and socio-economic context of the schools that they served. Although this cross-section was accidental, the researcher found that it was beneficial: the participants represented a cross-section of the population of secondary headteachers within the local authority. Critical case sampling was the sub-type of purposive sampling that was used (Rai & Thapa, 2015) as the breadth of experience of the participants was wide enough to assume that this would be broadly representative of headteachers across the specified local authority, and, in turn, could be extrapolated nationally.

A transcript-based approach was used for recording the data. The discussion was recorded through Microsoft Teams and transcribed on to One Note. This was due to the volume of information that was shared within the focus group, and the fact that the researcher-as-moderator's recollections would be regarded as an inferior method of analysis (Onwuegbize et al., 2009).

Analysis Strategy

To analyse the policy discourse and the media representations of inclusion, the researcher made use of Bacchi’s (2009) *What is the problem represented to be?* (WPR) method of inquiry, chosen because it is a mode of enquiry which lends itself to issues of power and social change.

In this research, the research considers through critical discourse analysis how the media and professional association representations define and shape the equity agenda through their vocabulary.

Findings and Discussion

Representations Within Policy Literature and Selected Print Media

When considering the selected policy documents, a basic analysis of the frequency of key terms (*inclusion/inclusive/include, equity, social justice, relationships, violence, exclusion*) was used to give an indication of the focus, reported in order of frequency in Table 1.

The study of 57 news outlet headlines also showed how frequently particular words or terms were used when referring to additional support needs or inclusion more broadly. The headlines were selected by the researcher searching all headlines of the news sources from January 2023 onwards.

Table 1

Sources and the Incidence of Key Words

	Policy Literature				Media				
	Presumption of Mainstream	Included, Engaged and Involved	Behaviour in Scottish Schools	National Framework for Inclusion	TES	BBC	The Herald	The Scotsman	Daily Record
Total word count	7,247	14,635	646	4,387	152	47	67	146	158
Inclusion/inclusive/include	69	51	1	72	0	0	0	0	0
Equity	7	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Social Justice	0	1	0	4	0	0	0	0	0
Relationships	9	0	5	4	0	0	0	0	0
Violence	0	1	1	0	5	4	3	5	11
Exclusion	3	143	0	2	1	0	0	2	1

The researcher also considered the incidence of the key terms per 100 words of print, summarised in Table 2.

Table 2

Sources with Key Words Analysed to See Incidence Per 100 Words

	Policy Literature				Media				
	Presumption of Mainstream	Included, Engaged and Involved	Behaviour in Scottish Schools	National Framework for Inclusion	TES	BBC	The Herald	The Scotsman	Daily Record
Total word count	7,247	14,635	646	4,387	152	47	67	146	158
Inclusion/inclusive/include	1	0.3	0.2	1.64	0	0	0	0	0
Equity	0.1	0.01	0	0.02	0	0	0	0	0
Social Justice	0	0	0	0.09	0	0	0	0	0
Relationships	0.1	0	0.8	0.09	0	0	0	0	0
Violence	0	0	0.2	0	3.3	8.5	4.5	3.4	6.96
Exclusion	0.04	1	0	0.05	0.66	0	0	1.37	0.64

Striking about the headline analysis was the emphasis on violence. Across the sources, this was grouped with emotive terms: “escalating”, a need to “stamp out”, “epidemic”, “exodus” (of support staff), “crisis”, “rising tide”, “summit”, “no time to lose”, “chaos”. The use of figurative language painted the landscape of pupil behaviour as being of a catastrophic nature (“epidemic”, “crisis”) and on the increase (“rising tide”, “no time to lose”). Conversely, there was a distinct absence within the headlines to signpost what schools are doing to address behaviour, or any consideration to the causes of behaviour difficulties.

Tone

The emotive language has the cumulative effect of establishing a rhetoric within the written press which is quite different in tone from what is in the selected policy documentation. While the policies are written for the profession, the press has a wider societal reach.

Professional association websites demonstrate challenge to the policy drivers and the researcher found these to be more aligned with the rhetoric evident in the media headlines. For example, the EIS’s Annual General Meeting Presidential (2024) address spoke of, “violence and aggression a daily occurrence in up to 82% of our workplaces”, whereas the NASUWT website’s Pupil Behaviour Position Statement highlights “disruption and violence” within its first sentence (NASUWT, 2024).

Focus Groups

The focus group discussions provided a rich source of data about headteacher voice on how the language of inclusion impacts on their leadership of equity. Following a semantic thematic coding exercise (Braun & Clarke, 2022), the researcher identified the following inter-related themes (Figure 1) as being key to understanding the points of the discussions that resonated most deeply with the school leaders:

Figure 1
Themes Identified from HT Focus Groups



The Power of Voices

Headteachers talked about the disparity between how they heard behaviour referred to in school, and the contrast with how behaviour was represented in the media. They also talked about the spin that media often add. This had an emotional impact on school leaders, as exemplified by one of the focus group participants: "I became outraged by the line of questioning... not at all atypical" (HT1).

There was consensus between the focus groups that the voices that commentate on education are extremely influential. Headteachers were passionate in their expression of the desire to move forward with educational reform and their belief that this was being hampered by the influence of the media and professional associations in promoting a narrow range of issues. Headteachers were disheartened when this also appeared to influence political decision making:

The Education Secretary is jumping on the back of some of the things that come out of that because it looks popular. It looks like it's a statistic to use, but actually it's got quite a negative impact on what you're actually trying to do: trying to support young people (HT2)

Headteachers felt the way that information is presented through the media and professional associations shaped conversation as it influenced perception.

Headteachers also spoke about how the language advocated by professional associations appeared to frame how some teachers felt about dealing with behaviour issues: "I hear I'm unsafe, this is unreasonable, I shouldn't have to [be unsafe] at my work" (HT4). Headteachers found this problematic and undermining to the leadership of equity.

Language: Metaphors and Evolution

When discussing language, individual perception featured extensively. What was common was that consideration of language led to an emotional response. Between both focus groups, there was an acknowledgement that terminology relating to inclusion evolves and it is difficult as a headteacher to always be aware of terminology change.

The metaphor of *fight* divided opinion amongst participants. One said, “the term fight is an interesting one. I don’t like it in any regard. We’re in a caring profession” (HT1) whereas another represented it quite differently: “I’m doing that deliberately to say that we’re together, we’re a community... People would say, fight for young people. And that would be in the sense of, ensure that they have everything in place to support them.” (HT4) This view was echoed by another participant: “We're fighting for the children. We can see what's happening to young people. And it's terrifying, like it's so sad. But you're also fighting for your staff because they're, they're struggling with it” (HT5).

Societal issues

Headteachers discussed how schools had changed during their time as leaders. They spoke of the enhanced development in the diagnosis of neurodivergent conditions, including an ever-evolving use of language that they felt pressured to keep up with.

There was considerable passion exhibited when the discussion turned to how young people fit into society: “You can't fix what society's creating, which is distressed, challenged, impoverished young people.” (HT4).

Lobby groups were also presented as being influential to the context of schools. Headteachers spoke about their role in trying to ensure equity between marginalised groups, which could be challenging, particularly concerning “politically loaded” issues such as “global flashpoints”: specific examples given were the Gaza conflict, the Black Lives Matter movement, and complexities surrounding the expression of views on LGBT issues.

Impact on the Leadership of Equity

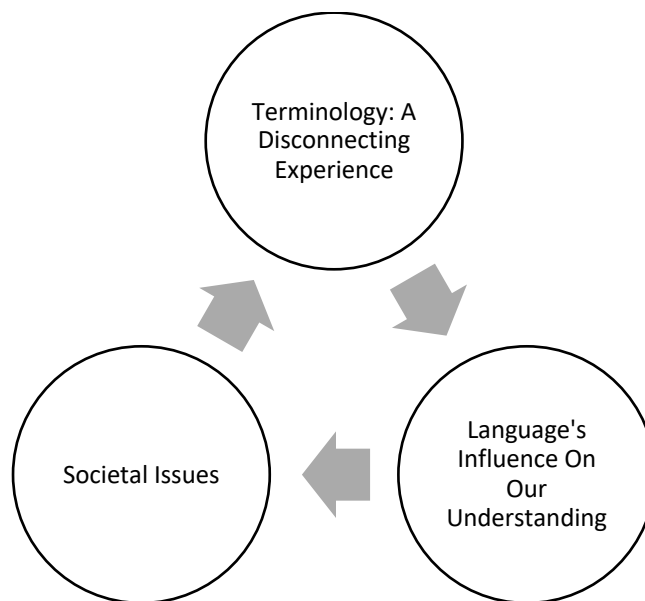
There was consensus between both focus groups that the presentation of inclusion through language undermines the headteachers’ leadership of equity within their schools. Stelmach, Smith and O’Connor (2021) write about the tension that can exist between one’s inner convictions and external expectations, leading to “moral distress”. This was evident in various strands of the focus group discussion, most notably in terms of how time is spent and, by extension, how it is not being spent.

Discussion

In this study, themes about how language affects understanding came through strongly from both the literature and the empirical data gathered from the headteachers. The field of education is complex and dynamic. This complexity leads to differing interpretations. Policy should provide the frame of reference for teachers. However, in reality, the combination of policy with other powerful voices – those of the media, professional associations, society – gives rise to alternative viewpoints from those articulated in policy, leading to a conflict between policy and practice.

From this research, the key conflicts impacting on education leadership for headteachers are as follows (Figure 2):

Figure 2
Key Conflicts Impacting on Leadership for Equity



Terminology: A Disconnecting Experience

The findings suggest that specific terminology is crucial to a consensus in understanding. The term *inclusion* is central to Scottish education, and *social justice* is the first professional value detailed within the General Teaching Council for Scotland’s Standards (GTCS, 2021).

The implication is an unsettling influence on the teaching community where behaviour has been re-framed in the mainstream media using disaster metaphors (“crisis”, “epidemic”). Headteachers find that this language undermines the leadership of equity as it changes the focus from what is expected in a school community to something which is much more divisive and polarised. There is interplay here between terminology and societal issues, as the current social and economic context is putting pressure on those most disadvantaged in society, which has consequences for inclusion in schools.

Language Influences the Way We Understand

What was of more importance to the headteachers who contributed to this research was that the changing language is undermining the leadership of equity as the way in which issues are being presented appears to be changing attitudes towards the situation – this is particularly true about behaviour. The findings suggest that headteachers are uncomfortable about this as they feel it is leading to a situation where young people can be vilified through the depictions of them, and that power dynamics can become blurred.

Recommendation 1: Teachers who understand and respond to additional support needs

There is a gap between the language of policy and the practice of the profession. In the space between policy and practice, there is dialogue and the influence of media sources, professional associations and stakeholders in education. It is recognised that ASN are more represented within

the more deprived SIMD deciles¹ and that the ASN categorisation in Scotland includes behaviour (Scottish Government, 2004). Issues impacting on poverty are increasingly prevalent in society: the impact of Covid-19, economic instability, substance misuse, climate catastrophe, social unrest. The headteachers anticipate ASN to grow. An increase in ASN likely to make our schools and classrooms more diverse and challenging; teachers are needed who understand and are responsive to such diversity and challenge. A critical consciousness of the language of inclusion and the latent inequalities that go with mis-representations of the policies and practice of inclusion, is imperative.

Implications on Leadership for Equity

The literature suggests that there is a need for an increased understanding of contextual variables that impact on our students' daily lives and opportunities to learn (Lash & Sanchez, 2022). This is supported by the empirical data gathered from headteachers who talked about many contextual factors, including some which are particular to the post-Covid landscape and point towards increased challenges which are likely to come in the long term regarding early literacy and child development.

Societal Issues

The findings suggest that headteachers' leadership of equity is impacted considerably by societal issues which are outwith the control of individual schools. Headteachers in both focus groups spoke about global conflict and the leadership struggles that they have in trying to manage the political sensitivities at school level.

Recommendation 2: The need for local authority guidance

There was considerable difference in how headteachers viewed their school's place in giving voice to issues of global sensitivity. When situations are sensitive and impact on whole communities, the provision of guidance from the local authority to support headteachers' response would be a supportive action to avoid the variance that the findings of this research suggest are arising.

Furthermore, the different representations of inclusion lead to issues for headteachers in leading equity within their schools. These issues include the concept of othering, of ignoring the life histories and experiences of marginalised groups, the perpetuating of oppressive systems, and social and school exclusion. Inclusion is a noun, a state of being. It is our responsibility as educators to include, yet there are many contested situations about whether it is always possible, truly desirable, in everyone's best interests, and fair. A steer from the local authority would cut through the variance of individualised interpretations.

Conclusion

This study had three research questions at its heart and conclusions about each have been drawn:

1. How is the language of inclusion represented within current selected Scottish educational policy?

In the policy included within this study, there was a tone of optimism. Ministerial forewords added weight to the policies, defining education within the vision for a just society (Scottish Government,

¹ The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) (Scottish Government, 2020) is a tool to identify areas of concentrated deprivation

2017, p. 1). WPR analysis found a strong thread of social justice, with a focus on relational practice and positive school ethos.

2. How is the language of inclusion represented in other sources of media with a wider reach than policy?

In contrast, analysis of media headlines had a different focus. Behaviour was the most-often highlighted ASN, frequently framed as “violent”, and contributing to a cumulative picture of schools being painted as chaotic environments.

The Scottish Government updated guidance on behaviour has recently been published (Scottish Government, 2024). Although full analysis of the new guidance has been beyond the scope of this study, initial reading suggests that its emphasis is more on violence than previous iterations have been, signalling a change in direction for Scottish Government framing of inclusive practice.

3. How do the various representations of inclusion impact on headteachers’ experience of the leadership of equity within their contexts?

Headteachers spoke with passion about leading equity. There was a shared understanding acknowledged that the teaching profession is deeply committed to inclusion. There was a prevailing view noted that there is a discord between the intent of policy and day-to-day practice in schools.

There was also a feeling of dismay amongst headteachers about how behaviour is represented. The latent power of some of the voices, particularly those of professional associations and the media, was acknowledged.

Implications and Summary Recommendations

1. It is important that headteachers are supported by their local authorities to lead with confidence, and this should include being given guidance on global issues with political sensitivities.
2. A recommendation is for the theme of the influence of language on attitudes to be included in programmes designed to support development of aspirant and new headteachers. This will support their developing critical consciousness as they lead school communities in challenging times.
3. A strong understanding of ASN and the implications of these is imperative for a workforce which is capable of responding to the needs of such diversity and challenge. Consideration of the language of inclusion and the latent inequalities that can go with mis-representations of this language, is imperative.

The interplay between language, attitude and human behaviour is fundamental to how society understands and operates. As educators in Scotland, we have a stated commitment to social justice. For this to be truly embodied, how we as a society use language about inclusion is paramount.

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