Moving towards inclusive education: 
Can inclusive research help?

Melanie Nind
Professor of Education, University of Southampton
Co-Director, ESRC National Centre for Research Methods

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Abstract

Julie Allan has described inclusive education as being in a ‘bit of bother’ and the observation that the move towards inclusive education has stalled is commonplace. The concept itself is contested. With arguments about evidence versus ideology not yet put to bed it is inevitable that progress falters. In this seminar I will argue that inclusive (participatory or emancipatory) research might offer some help in inclusive education finding its way. I will make the case that inclusive research - more than other kinds of research on the topic - has the potential to secure the trust of the educational community in the phenomenon if this involves co-producing relevant knowledge about it. Drawing on my recent research on quality in inclusive research, I will explore the synergies between inclusive education and inclusive research and argue that it is nonsensical that the two do not come together more often.

Introduction

In this paper I shall be arguing:

1. Inclusive education is in a ‘bit of bother’ and that it is contested – conceptually and practically;

2. Inclusive (participatory or emancipatory) research and inclusive education have much in common but are often not joined up;

3. Inclusive research might offer some help in inclusive education finding its way; it has the potential to secure the trust of the educational community in the phenomenon of inclusive education if inclusive research involves co-producing relevant knowledge about it.
Note: The seminar paper draws on a seminar I prepared for a BERA day conference in November 2012 in which the philosophy and inclusive education SIGs came together. I have developed my thinking further since then in part in preparing a paper for a subsequent special issue of Cambridge Journal of Education on this theme. (The paper is still under review so I may regret mentioning it, but it would be self-plagiarism not to.)

Why am I bringing two difficult concepts together? Both are contentious - accused of being ideological and impractical – so isn’t bringing them together a recipe for disaster? Inclusive education and inclusive research have more in common than this first, rather obvious, similarity. Both are complex social movements that have promoting social justice at their core.

Inclusive education, I argue, acts to bring in learners from the periphery, making everyday education more responsive to all learners. Inclusive research, in turn, acts to bring people who are usually the subject of other people’s research into the heart of the research process as producers or co-producers of knowledge.

Before I begin my argument, I share with you two occasions when these two concepts connected for me in a way that had a lasting legacy. The first was the Testimonies of Resistance in Learning Disability History conference. I was working at the Open University at the time, developing distance learning materials in inclusive education. The conference involved a mix of academics, practitioners and people with learning disabilities in all the roles of audience, speaker, organiser. An academic researcher was presenting her findings about the history of a long-stay institution she had been researching using archive material. Part way through explaining something about the education going on at the institution she was interrupted by an older woman with learning disabilities in the audience (Mabel Cooper) who assertively challenged the academic based on her own different knowledge derived from having lived a good deal of her life in an institution. Thus experiential knowledge was challenging the veracity of academic knowledge and this felt significant; this issue of different ways of knowing is vital for inclusion I will argue.

A decade later I was running a seminar series on the concept of access for people with learning disabilities. We were working on understanding the process of accessing ordinary things in a range of domains, including education. By ‘we’ I mean academics, practitioners and people with learning disabilities – I had already learned about the foolishness of attempting such exploration without this kind of collaboration. In my mind we had a shared purpose and collective understanding; I was already mentally developing a complex multi-

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layered model of access from the discussion. Then one of the participants interjected in my line of thought with a comment along the lines of: ‘I just want the bus to stop when I put out my hand’. This was a cry for action and not for a complex theoretical model! Again, I will return to this issue of different priorities. First, I return to the first argument about inclusive education.

1. Inclusive education is in a ‘bit of bother’; progress has stalled & it’s a conceptual mess

Inclusive education is troubled, the concept is undermined by arguments about ideology versus evidence. The much described journey of/towards inclusive education seems to have lost its way somewhat with the diversity with which the term is used having become so extensive that its meaning is often lost. Ainscow and Cesar have created a typology of ways of thinking about inclusion:

- inclusion as concerned with disability and special educational needs;
- inclusion as a response to disciplinary exclusions;
- inclusion as about all groups vulnerable to exclusion;
- inclusion as the promotion of a school for all; and
- inclusion as Education for All as per the international movement co-ordinated by UNESCO.

Here we see that it makes no sense to talk of an inclusive education movement; there are, as Peter Clough has argued, multiple inclusive education movements.

Added to this conceptual confusion are the arguments about whether we can recognise inclusive education when we see it. For some commentators it is appropriate to think in terms of an exclusion-inclusion continuum with an unchanged/traditional education set up at one end and inclusion at the other and lots of in-betweeness; for others it is only appropriate to think of inclusive education as a radical departure from the traditional. Here we see the concept of positioned in relation to integration, specifying that it is schools not

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children that have to adapt to create a good fit. There is also the concept of inclusion as a journey in which one moves towards inclusive education but never gets there, as Julie Allan says, a project that is never complete.

It is clear to see from all this how the moves towards inclusive education might stall. Do special educators have a role to play in the transition or in the future, or does the fundamental incompatibility between special education thinking and inclusive education thinking that Thomas and Loxley have eloquently argued cut off this line of progression? Does an educator feel she only has the power to tinker at the edges of changing school dynamics yet faced with the ideas that only radical transformation will do? If gestures aren’t enough then is it worth starting at all, or do moments of inclusion add up into something more?

Another significant sticking point surrounds the question of whether inclusive education does indeed offer moral or ethical superiority. It has an ethical appeal as a ‘self-evidently good thing’; it is based on righting the wrongs of traditional binaries in an education system that segregates and marginalizes. There is a strong ethical component about including a greater diversity of learners being the right, if not the easiest, thing to do. Yet inclusive education is accused of being ideological, naive, politically driven. Even Mary Warnock, historically so strongly associated with the continuum idea and moves towards inclusion has come out and argued that it was never their intention ‘that all children should be taught under the same roof or that special schools should be abolished. This was, and remains, an extremist position’. Ofsted have messed around with ideas about inclusive schools as have various governments, leaving teachers unsure of their ground, unsure of the policies, and most importantly, I argue, distanced from any inclusive education agenda. It has become unclear who the beneficiaries and stakeholders in inclusive education actually are.

2. Inclusive (participatory or emancipatory) research and inclusive education have much in common but are often not joined up

So why am I arguing that inclusive research might have something to offer in inclusive education finding its way. I will begin by defining inclusive research, then I will discuss what it has in common with inclusive education, and why the two have not come together more

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11 See #5
often, before finally making the case for why it makes sense to look at what inclusive research might offer inclusive education.

The term inclusive research is not widely used. It was first used in the field of learning disability by Jan Walmsley and Kelley Johnson, who proposed it as an umbrella term for research in which people with learning disabilities were involved in research beyond the role of subjects or respondents and into the roles of instigators, designers, data collectors, data analysts, and disseminators. It was a term that was more accessible than participatory and emancipatory research, and allowed, they argued, for the continuity and reciprocity between these concepts. In looking more widely at other fields I have extended the umbrella nature of the term to also embrace partnership and user-led research, child-led research, peer research, community research, activist scholarship, decolonizing research, community-based participatory research, participatory action research and democratic dialogue. Each approach in this family of approaches reflects a turn towards democratization of the research process, but each has its own emphasis and subtle variations.

The most well-known variants of inclusive research are participatory research, emancipatory research and participatory action research. Participatory research is commonly seen as ‘a research process which involves those being researched in the decision-making and conduct of the research, including project planning, research design, data collection and analysis, and/or the distribution and application of research findings’.

As Sheila Greene has discussed, the motivations for participatory research are various, including: listening better, accessing perspectives, understanding experiences, consulting, involving participants in decision-making, and working together to make something happen.

Emancipatory research is different in that those being researched - students, disabled people and so on – take control of the research to ensure that it is in their interests and that they are not exploited by academics who build careers based on study of them. In this conceptualisation, most commonly seen in disability studies, the researcher is either on the

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side of disabled people or else one of the oppressors\textsuperscript{19}; emancipatory research becomes about radically changing the social and material relations of research production\textsuperscript{20}.

Participatory action research (PAR) is often associated with involving the subjects of research in some or all of the stages of the research\textsuperscript{21} like participatory research. It is also largely associated with grass roots politics like emancipatory research. The commitment is usually for knowledge to be co-produced and on ‘authentic participation’\textsuperscript{22}. The emphasis in PAR though is on, alongside the features above, the research making things better for the people involved and affected\textsuperscript{23} and on participants as change agents.

Whatever element in the process of democratizing research is emphasised, the overlaps between these approaches are obvious to see. For Walmsley and Johnson inclusive research must be relevant to the people concerned; it must matter to them and benefit them, ‘access and represent their views and experiences’, and treat them with respect. ‘Inclusive research is with, by or sometimes for - the researched - in contrast to research on them. There is a focus on collaboration and respect for different ways of knowing and different knowers with an explicit purpose of social transformation’\textsuperscript{24}. Differences between the actual approaches under the umbrella of inclusive research may be ‘more a matter of emphasis than kind’\textsuperscript{25}, though some would argue (echoing the inclusive education arguments) for a radical departure rather than a continuum.

I have alluded here to one of many commonalities between inclusive education and inclusive research, but there are many more. I have already mentioned in my introduction that the two share the status of being contentious in seeking a political goal. They are both regarded as difficult to put into practice. They each change the dynamics of a process that has long been criticised for being hierarchical, elitist or divisive in nature. Inclusive research de-privileges certain kinds of expertise\textsuperscript{26} just as inclusive education de-privileges certain kinds of learner. They share a concern with inclusion and exclusion, participation and marginalisation. And both are subject to a rhetoric that can make them difficult to challenge.

\textsuperscript{24} Nind, M. forthcoming.
It might seem obvious, therefore, that inclusive education and inclusive research share terrain in the research literature – that they come together in practice. Yet this is less common than one might think. Moves toward inclusive research are more evident in the fields of childhood and disability studies than in education. This is where the debates about the need for a shift in identity and role dynamics have been most alive. Notably, Mary Kellett has argued that children are active meaning-makers, capable of co-constructing knowledge and leading research. Long before this social model of disability theorists have highlighted the marginal and subjugated position of disabled people, pushing the research agenda towards disabled people’s research into their experience of disabling barriers, thereby challenging them. Disability activists have argued for empowering themselves individually and collectively in part through their involvement in research. People with learning disabilities involved in organised self-advocacy have become involved in inclusive research. For example, Lou Townson and fellow self-advocate researchers have argued for ‘people-led research’, which ‘is started and led by us, we are not following someone else, or being partly included, which also means partly rejected, by someone else’. But the subject of such inclusive research has usually been about adult lives and not inclusive education.

The drivers for inclusive research can be summed up as a desire for empowerment, transformation, disruption of the hierarchy/dichotomy (powerful/powerless), active citizenship/involvement, authenticity of research findings (knowledge grounded in experience), accessibility of findings and process (research open to all), ethical respectful treatment of people who are usually researched ‘on’, the recognition of the competence of people whose potential has been neglected, and – of course – inclusion. There are echoes of these components in inclusive education’s concern with transformation rather than tinkering, active participation and not just a gesture/desk in a mainstream classroom, accessibility thereby opening up everyday education to all by addressing barriers, ethics in being seen as the right thing to do, recognition of competence and histories of under-estimation of disabled children, girls etc, and – of course – inclusion, the ethic of everyone. But their coming together is disrupted by education (with a few notable exceptions) not being at the forefront of power/voice/citizenship work (there are stronger discourses and policies in health and social work, human geography, childhood studies), by the focus of inclusive research rarely being on inclusive education, and by the position of teachers in


inclusive research being at the troubled boundary of powerful/powerless. Hence, inclusive education and inclusive research seem to have remained unnecessarily and illogically less involved with each other than one might expect.

3. Inclusive research might offer some help in inclusive education finding its way; it has the potential to secure the trust of the educational community in the phenomenon of inclusive education if inclusive research involves co-producing relevant knowledge about it.

First, I must make clear that I am not the first to see the relevance of inclusive research for inclusive education. Suzanne Carrington and colleagues have used a model of young people as researchers to study students’ disengagement from school in Australia. Their research focused on student voice manages to disrupt the usual social production of research about inclusion and exclusion in education. Mel Ainscow and colleagues in the UK, developed an action research network to explore inclusive practices in schools involving extensive practitioner-academic partnerships although the discourse of the traditional researcher remains somewhat dominant. Kiki Messiou has researched marginalisation in schools based on a working assumption that children have vital knowledge about processes that hinder and promote inclusion and using participatory methods to engage their voices.

Biographical narrative techniques have been used to foreground experiential knowledge in studying exclusion processes, thereby placing socially excluded young adults ‘in a situation of enunciation that has traditionally been denied them’. And in a rare example of a paper co-authored by everyone involved, the workings of a collaborative inquiry circle involving a collaboration between academics and teachers in the US discusses how they worked together to resist and transgress dominant narratives of disability in education. As one teacher concluded: ‘What is the use of my having a philosophical view without the willingness to roll up my sleeves to effect changes or move barriers that stand in the way? Part and parcel of a being a teacher is recognising that teaching is ethical work’. Such examples cross the globe, but are still surprisingly small, and more importantly, the potential of the inclusive research processes are often under-explored.

If we turn to the arguments about the logic of the moral superiority of a more democratic research process the potential for inclusive research becomes clearer. A central argument is that inclusive research is more respectful, caring and socially just\textsuperscript{36}, more sensitive to issues of power, rights and responsibilities, ‘more egalitarian and democratic’\textsuperscript{37}. Thus, the ethical draw for inclusive research is that it can give voice to people who have not had it, redress misinformation, and challenge ideas about who can speak with authority about whom and what.

Furthermore, inclusive research, the argument goes, is not merely more just, but leads to superior outcomes. They are superior (compared with traditional research) in their greater accountability to the people the research should serve and benefit\textsuperscript{38}. This is connected with asking more relevant questions which makes the research more meaningful and more engaging of under-represented groups\textsuperscript{39}. It would follow that inclusive research produces more authentic knowledge\textsuperscript{40} (Grover, 2004) because it is more grounded in the experiences and values of those concerned who are experts by experience. The knowledge may be richer for being co-produced or co-interpreted, ‘local, collective, co-created, dialogical and diverse\textsuperscript{41}, offering new lines of vision\textsuperscript{42}. It may challenge traditional concepts, and empower and emancipate along the way as ‘those who have in the past so often been the mere objects of investigation, themselves become the agents of their own transformation’\textsuperscript{43}.

I have found from my own dialogic (not necessarily inclusive!) research with inclusive researchers that good social science research and good inclusive research coincide when the research: (i) answers questions we could not otherwise answer, but that are important; (ii) reaches participants, communities and knowledge, in ways that we could not otherwise access; (iii) involves using and reflecting on the insider, cultural knowledge of people with learning disabilities; (iv) is authentic (recognized by the people involved); and (v) makes [positive] impact on the lives of people with learning disabilities\textsuperscript{44}. This understanding of quality in inclusive research does not prescribe how it should be conducted, but it does

\textsuperscript{40} Grover, S. 2004. “Why won’t they listen to us?” on giving power and voice to children participating in social research, Childhood, 11(1), 81–93.
\textsuperscript{42} See\textsuperscript{19}
\textsuperscript{44} #28, pp43-44.
provide a vision of a way of doing research that is worth exploring in relation to inclusive education.

So, my argument is that the people involved with educational practice might be able to unlock inclusive education if they view themselves as having knowledge worth having, questions worth asking, and insights worth interrogating and sharing. It makes a difference if these people are creating research and knowledge from research, rather than having relatively passive roles in other people’s research. Through inclusive research the inclusive education project can become teachers’ and learners’ own. They are far more likely to trust something, whether it be a concept or evidence, they have shaped, invested in, co-created. In these circumstances inclusive research might just be able to help inclusive education to find its way.

I do not wish to glorify inclusive research, particularly when I have argued that we need to know it critically. But as I argue in my (hopefully) forthcoming paper, seeking democratic, inclusive school practices has so much in common with seeking democratic, inclusive school research practices that the latter must have relevance for the former. Researching together so strongly overlaps with teaching and learning together as a valid collaborative endeavour that it makes sense to use the former to somehow safely explore the latter. We can use inclusive research to free up roles and identities and traditional concepts, thereby releasing creative potential to construct an education that we might be happy to call inclusive. This is the authentic knowledge and the emancipatory process I have talked about. Inclusive research about inclusive education could, as I argue elsewhere (forthcoming again), ‘highlight the harms of oppression, the powers of collaborative problem-solving, and the potential for transformation’. Or am I being fanciful? Discuss!

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45 #16