

## INCLUSIVE EDUCATION RESEARCH

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When first commissioned as SIG convener to write a commentary for RI on the state of inclusive education research, I first read this as a commentary on the state of inclusive education itself. Thankfully, that rather depressing task amidst the context of coalition government's approach is not what is called for. Commentating on the state of research in this field is quite some task, however, and so I begin by clarifying that this commentary is more personal reflection, based on the studies I have read or been part of and the research that SIG members have shared – there is no 'systematic' in this review! The task led to conversations with colleagues on this theme and I am grateful to them for their insights.

The first question I posed in my internal dialogue was whether research in this field is thriving. The affirmative is indicated by the International Journal of Inclusive Education, which began in the late 90s with 4 issues per year and is now publishing 10 issues a year. (But we all know about journal publishing and commercial influences.) There is not a plethora of inclusive education journals in response to demand, however, but this I see influenced by the way in which research in this field has such soft boundaries with other fields. So, other rich sources of published inclusive education research are the journals concerned with race and ethnicity, gender, school effectiveness, teacher education, special education and so on. This is a field of research that is multi-dimensional: some dimensions were strongly evident in the 1990s and are still so, including the attitudinal - teachers' (and parents') attitudes to inclusion; the organizational – the role of special schools and school leaders; the social – around participation, culture and community; and inclusion as place – where learners are educated. Some areas, such as research into the relationship between inclusion and achievement, pedagogical approaches, and teacher development for inclusive education seem to be growing in momentum and some keep linking inclusive education back to the wider agendas of rights, voice and social justice. Some areas may have peaked, such as research into what works in inclusive education, as following what has been a lively debate about the nature of evidence, fewer systematic reviews seem to be being commissioned.

In terms of content then this field of research is rich and varied, but what of methodology? Inevitably the same variety is true as ethnographies, sociometrics, large scale surveys, case studies and action research projects each suit particular dimensions of the projects of understanding what makes education inclusive, how we are faring, and how we can do better. Somewhat disappointingly, our field has not enjoyed significant innovation or development methodologically so that we are rarely using inclusive approaches to explore inclusive education; there have been calls to take over the research agenda from disabled people – 'special school survivors' – but the spread and impact of this has perhaps been greater outside of educational research. Neither has there been the large scale research

council investment which might have consolidated the patchwork of diverse studies with something more substantial or joined up as has happened in early years education.

Even a brief reflective commentary on research in the 2010s cannot be complete without turning to quality and impact. Conceptually this area of educational research is messy. Part of the project has been seeking to define inclusive education and the relationships between inclusion, exclusion, integration, diversity and so on. Despite policy rhetoric that has done more to confuse than clarify, and the existence of multiple inclusion movements rather than single movement, we have made some headway. Like progression towards inclusive education itself, however, this is headway faltering. Practitioners can cite research that says inclusive education is a success/failure/risky venture without solid evidence/ exciting adventure offering great promise. Despite such ambiguity, inclusive education is not going away as a talking point or mental reference point; the research has had an effect on the collective mindset and for those wanting them, there are credible and worthwhile pointers to be found in the research.

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