

## *Special Issue Editorial*

### *Inclusive research in education: Contributions to method and debate*

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Education is not necessarily associated with inclusive research and the label of inclusive research is little used in our discipline. It is an umbrella term encompassing participatory, emancipatory and community/peer-led research. This is research in which those (such as learners and teachers) who tend to be the objects of other people's research become agents in the conduct of research, ensuring that such research addresses issues that are important to them and includes their views and experiences (see Walmsley and Johnson, 2003 and Nind 2014 for more on definitions). Conceptualising some research as inclusive is part of a concern with the democratization of the research process and with social justice - in and through - research; it represents an interest in the people outside of academia being active and credible producers of knowledge.

Education has an important history of teacher research and in the UK the work of Lawrence Stenhouse and colleagues (1985) helped to raise the profile of teacher experimentation and teacher knowledge working alongside, in dialogue with, or in place of, academic knowledge. The debates about the separation or otherwise of educational research from teachers' agendas and practice (e.g. Hargreaves 1996/2007; Hammersley 2007) are well known. Modern versions of teacher-research have stressed local relevance (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler 2007), enhanced capacity for learning (Christie and Menter 2009), and the bringing together of different perspectives (Bartlett and Burton 2006) and knowledges (Cain 2010). Education also has a deep seam of action research in which the dynamics and power relations of researching *on* educational players is unsettled and in which allies and researchers overlap and merge in seeking practical benefits (Elliott 1991, 2007). Recent work on student voice and children as researchers has brought other ways of knowing and more participatory research methods into the mix (e.g. Leitch et al. 2007; O'Brien and Moules 2007; Cox and Robinson-Pant 2008). To our knowledge, though, this is the first collection of papers to fully and explicitly focus on the methodological challenges of researching inclusively in education.

Certain conditions need to be in place for inclusive research. Walmsley (2004, 69) argues that 'only the excluded need inclusive research'. This might explain why there is much more explicit discussion of inclusive research in the field of learning disabilities, for example, with

special issues in the British Journal of Learning Disabilities and the Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities marking the prominence of this work. Whilst there is a wealth of inclusive research in the field of learning disabilities, there are still some areas that have been underdeveloped and unchallenged. For example, a current ESRC funded seminar series is examining the often ignored issues of participatory data analysis and the participation of people with high support needs [1]. Often forms of inclusive research, such as decolonizing research (Smith 2012), arise in opposition to what has gone before where people have been oppressed, colonized, marginalised or rejected by research (Nind 2014). It may be that teachers and learners have not felt the force of this and this has subdued any drive to inclusive research. Inclusive research is associated with social movements such as self-advocacy (Walmsley and Johnson 2003), user-led services (Frankham 2009), and community involvement in healthcare (Minkler and Wallerstein 2008). The paradigm shift around children as active subjects and expert knowers has been associated with new roles for children in research (Kellett 2005; Mason & Danby 2011). While there have been inclusive education movements, they have been focused on the substantive conceptual battles and practical challenges. There are examples of action research networks (e.g. Ainscow, Booth and Dyson 2004) and pupil involvement in research about inclusive education (e.g. Carrington et al. 2003) but these are not as plentiful as one might imagine. As a consequence of the interaction of the above factors, the important discussions about the romanticization or problematization of inclusive research that have taken place in the broad social science and qualitative research arenas have not been extensively applied to education research specifically.

In the field of learning disabilities talk is turning to a second generation of inclusive research in which the focus is shifting from practical processes and managing power toward quality research and the co-produced knowledge it generates (Nind, forthcoming). In participatory health research the ethics of inclusive are becoming better understood (Cook 2012) and the impacts (not just positive) of doing research inclusively are being researched (Staley 2009). In children's research the immaturity of the field has been noted (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008) and critical debate is rich; Porter, Townsend and Hampshire (2012, 131) in their special issue of *Children's Geographies* on children and young people as producers of knowledge observe:

For academics, working with children as research partners (as opposed to research subjects) is by no means beyond dispute. An exciting but arguably perilous enterprise, it brings to the fore a range of debates around power relations, ethics, capacities and competencies (of all concerned).

One such debate is that surrounding whether or not participation is as easy or as simple as frequently portrayed in the field. For example, Todd (2012) argues that notions of a ladder of participation (Hart 1992) are insufficiently nuanced for educational contexts.

The question arises as to whether education presents a particular set of circumstances for exploring these issues. This collection of papers is written in the context of growing interest in creative and innovative methodologies in educational and social research, amidst concern with student voice, and at a time when inclusive research is being critically examined and, arguably, at a critical juncture. The papers come from authors in the UK, Australia and the Netherlands with an interesting preponderance of work being conducted in the Higher Education (HE) context; University students are the methodological partners or agents in four of the six papers, with their contributions enacted and analysed in different ways.

In two very different papers, the focus is on student teachers: Black-Hawkins and Amrhein discuss the use of a metaphor elicitation method with trainee teachers in England and Germany, as a way of accessing their perspectives, providing a means to tell their stories, and encouraging deeper reflection on teaching practices. This method provided rich insights into student teachers' views, and these were similar in both Germany and England; crucially, the students were also highly engaged in the task and willing to dedicate their time to it thereby emphasizing the value of the method in supporting stronger engagement and participation. Nevertheless, Black-Hawkins and Amrhein illustrate that it is not the method *per se* that determines inclusivity, but how the methods are used or adapted for different contexts that really matters. For example, the authors highlight the importance of not making the participatory research space an entirely open one from the start by providing exemplars and initial ideas to stimulate thinking. In other words, deeper engagement of the student teachers was supported by *researcher-led* aspects of the method, which highlights that researcher-led objectives and expertise can remain an important part of the mix.

Hall is also concerned with the role of metaphor and story-telling as a way of sharing and creating meaning from diverse experiences; this time in the context of Aboriginal teachers and their pathways to becoming fully qualified as teachers. Hall presents a rich account of the problems with dominant cultures in researching the experiences of indigenous people without sufficient respect or attention paid to different 'ways of knowing'. She advocates for a more radical shift away from standard research paradigms towards methods that are based on more shared and mutual forms of dialogue and, importantly, which must begin with the 'worldview of those at the centre of the research' (XX). In this context, Hall discusses the powerful possibilities for story-telling as a method in part because '...it can create a power shift in research where the participant is able to direct the course of the research and retain ownership over it' (XX). One of the key messages from this work is that the process of engagement through the research can be just as important as the outcomes (findings) that may follow from it.

The emphasis on the process of research is also reflected in Welikala and Atkin's paper focusing on university students as co-inquirers in conducting research on the 'student experience'. Undergraduate and postgraduate students were involved as co-inquirers, conducting 'active interview conversations' (XX) with other students from their own and

other institutions. In a similar way to Black-Hawkins and Amrhein (and in contrast to Hall), their research started with an already defined, academic researcher led, methodological plan; the student co-inquirers collaborated in planning and conducting the interviews with participants. However, students initially struggled with understanding their roles in the research, often feeling insecure, unprepared and uncomfortable with knowing what was really expected of them. This links with Black-Hawkins and Amrhein's paper in the sense that perhaps the expectations placed upon the (new) partners in research can sometimes come with a 'design space' that is too open and unspecified, which can be experienced as problematic. Sometimes, creating initial boundaries in (researcher-led) research, and clarifying roles, can be helpful rather than compromising in relation to engagement and participation.

In a similar vein, MacLeod, Lewis and Robertson describe a researcher-led project, in which higher education students diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome were encouraged to reflect on their experience of being a participant in research, and how they felt about the methods used. Participants were offered the choice of a face-to-face, telephone or online interview, with most opting for face-to-face option. Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews based on asking students to consider 'critical incidents' which they could prepare beforehand; thus, as with other papers in this special issue, the role of narrative or story-telling was prominent in the method. Students were also involved in the interpretation of data and in reviewing drafts of papers and reports. MacLeod and colleagues discuss this way of working as a 'transparent partnership cycle' (xx) which showed how and where participants preferred to participate. There were limitations to participation, with aspects of the research '...that were less obviously related to the lives of the individuals' (xx) proving more challenging to elicit feedback on. This highlights that not everyone involved in participatory research is comfortable with taking on all of the roles that such research participation entails and, once again, the different roles and expertise that each individual brings need to be acknowledged.

Parsons and Cobb pursue the idea of boundaries and limitations of participatory research in the context of a learner-centred design project aimed at children on the autism spectrum. This paper moves away from higher education to consider the challenges of developing innovative technologies within schools, whilst simultaneously juggling the views and needs of a range of stakeholders. Notably, while other papers in the special issue consider only one group of marginalised voices, this paper considers the integration of different voices (for example, children, parents and teachers), alongside the role of theory and also the technological 'tools' that researchers have at their disposal. The resulting 'design space' is complex and challenging because there is new intellectual territory where it may not be clear who the experts on a particular aspect of the project may be (including the researchers). This is in contrast to the common position in this special issue and beyond (e.g. Kellett 2011) in which participants are considered to be experts on their own lives and

experiences, and methods are used or approaches developed to empower individuals to share these. The authors raise a question about whether it is possible to simultaneously meet objectives about participatory *processes* in research as well as eventual *outcomes* of the research i.e. answering specific research questions (at least in researcher-led projects).

In the final paper, Mearns, Coyle and de Graaff describe their research in which Dutch secondary school pupils were recruited into consultant co-researcher roles for a project exploring student motivations in bilingual and regular schools in the Netherlands. As with most of the papers included in this issue, this was a researcher-initiated project in which roles for students were planned and then negotiated. In a similar way to Black-Hawkins and Amrhein; Parsons and Cobb; and Welikala and Atkin, the differing expertise of each 'group' (including the researchers) was important for the successful engagement of participants: '...while young people can offer added insight in research with their peers, trained adult researchers' knowledge and experience of research and methodology can be a necessary complement to this insight' (xx). Thus, again, clarity around roles and boundaries within the research was important. In addition, Mearns et al. show that methods used do not have to be innovative to be engaging and rather than make assumptions about this it is important to be willing to change a course of action or methodological plan in the light of feedback from others.

Overall then, a number of themes emerge from the papers in this special issue. First, these papers all make connections between inclusive research in education and research conducted in other fields or contexts extending to include anthropology, human-computer interaction, social work, philosophy and health. Second, there are differing views from the papers regarding the role and status of specific methods in inclusive research; some authors argue for the need for more 'disruptive' methodological approaches that move us away from more traditional views (e.g. Hall) while others argue that the more traditional methods may be more effective because participants/co-researchers may be more familiar with them (e.g. Mearns et al). This difference in views raises an important question about whether inclusive research should be aiming to 'do' something different and whether, as a field, it can make claims for innovation and transformation if the methods used are not 'disruptive'.

A third key theme from the papers is that inclusive research *can* be researcher-initiated and researchers have an important role to play alongside those we seek to include. Sometimes, in emphasizing a shift towards those who are traditionally marginalised in research academic researchers can agonize about their own roles and where they fit in. It is evident from many of these papers that researchers continue to play an important role in actualising inclusive research - research is, after all, what we do! Of course, being reflective about this, and providing clarity and critique about listening to diverse voices when making meaning (Clark 2001) and about where the boundaries and limitations of roles lie, remains crucial (Walmsley 2004). Nevertheless, papers in the special issue suggests that in conducting participatory research in education, it is often problematic to commence with a research

space that is too wide and open – a blank slate of possibilities may not be helpful. Instead, the people we engage in the research process often require and value some initial ideas and suggestions (from academic researchers) as a starting or discussion point. Of course, as Hall's paper also reminds us, the starting point needs to be within their 'worldview' and so time and effort to find out what individuals may or may not be comfortable with is important. Finally, in connecting with the 'worldview' of participants those of us involved in inclusive research need to take into account the practicalities and logistics of everyday life. The place and timing of discussions and meetings really matter for the effective engagement of those who may not be familiar with involvement in research. The papers suggest a need to take into account the wider context in which the research takes place rather than seeking to impose too many restrictions or requirements through our research designs.

In the call for papers for this special issue we stated that we were seeking reflective critiques of inclusive research that advance and challenge thinking around the benefits and quality of inclusive research, and papers that address the messy detail and sticking points in the reality and rhetoric of inclusive research. In considering whether the papers we have accepted into this special issue have addressed this call and what they contribute to the advancement of inclusive research we consider three issues. Firstly, what the papers contribute to the debates regarding the romanticization and problematization of inclusive research generally. Secondly, how the papers contribute to a developing understanding of what second generation inclusive research might look like. Thirdly, what their unique contribution to the development of inclusive research in education is.

With regards to challenging the romanticization of inclusive research, the papers by Weilikali and Atkins and Parsons and Cobb reaffirm the caution noted in the general literature regarding being too naive about the ease with which inclusive research can be achieved. Weilikali and Atkins invoke the writing of Fielding (2001, 2004) and Cook-Sather (2006) to highlight the need to acknowledge the 'ongoing struggle' to find spaces where teachers and students can engage as equals. Parsons and Cobb urge caution about being naive and viewing the possibilities of inclusive research with a 'rose tinted' perspective. The contexts in which these authors urge caution is the troubling of roles in inclusive research: who does what; whose voice is heard and who has the final say? This troubling is continued by MacLeod et al. through their involvement of students in the analysis of data. On the one hand this is a rare example of participatory data analysis (see also Seale 2008 and Seale et al. 2008 for other higher education examples). On the other hand they acknowledge that despite this commitment to the co-production of knowledge: 'This voice was not without boundaries – the research design was influenced, but not led by, the user group. Participatory analysis was interpreted here as 'a process of 'dialogue' rather than 'handing over control of something' (XX). It may be that in the search for an ideal within inclusive research the matter of who has power in research has been an over-simplified dominant

concern; what may matter more is the question of whether the research and those involved benefit from dialogue and co-production.

One area where the papers in this special issue might make a particular contribution is in the development of second generation inclusive research. For example, the papers provide an expansive vision of learners and learning. The participants in the studies reported in the papers ranged from school children, university students, to adults undergoing professional development and training. Whilst some of these participants might represent what is typically understood as marginalised or excluded groups (e.g. autistic children in the Parsons and Cobb paper and autistic university students in the paper by MacLeod et al.); others tend not be conceived of as marginalised (e.g. trainee teachers in the papers by Black-Hawkins and Amrhein and Hall). The papers therefore trouble the notion of 'exclusion'. In this special issue the papers conceptualise exclusion in a range of different ways. For Hall, the focus is on exclusion from culturally sensitive research. For MacLeod et al. the focus is on exclusion from particular aspects of research such as data analysis. For Black-Hawkins and Amrhein the focus is on preventing exclusion from meaningful opportunities to learn about inclusion through experiencing it. In her paper, Hall warns of the dangers of 'othering' participants in research as learners. Several of the other papers avoid this danger by positioning the researchers themselves as learners. For example, Mearns et al. talk of how the research provided a learning experience for both adults and young people.

This learning for the authors in this issue was often achieved through highly critical self-reflection where they grappled with and sometimes rejected the pressure for researchers to 'know all the answers' (see for example Parsons and Cobb). In addition to learning through critical self-reflection, the papers expand on how learning might be an outcome of inclusive research. Black-Hawkins and Amrhein suggest that inclusive research involves learning by doing, while Hall highlights the importance of learning from the past. Some of the papers offer insights into how we can learn to be more inclusive and/or do inclusive research better. For example, MacLeod et al. and Mearns et al. illustrate through their different projects how capacity-building can be built into inclusive research projects so that participants are supported to gain the skills they need to meaningfully engage in the research. The paper by Black-Hawkins and Amrhein presents a unique insight into how inclusive education might be modelled or illuminated for trainee teachers through their involvement in inclusive research.

Finally, the unique contribution that the papers in this special issue might make to the development of inclusive research in education is in the insights they provide into what factors might be incorporated into a framework for evaluating the quality of inclusive research in education. This might be a bold claim to make given that none of the papers explicitly articulate or propose an evaluation framework. Indeed, on the surface, they do what many other inclusive research projects do; simply to ask the participants to evaluate their experience of participation. Whilst finding out about how satisfied participants might be with the experience of engaging in inclusive research in education is undoubtedly

important, developments in inclusive research in other disciplines suggest that education will need to engage in a much more critical and in-depth way with the notion of what constitutes quality inclusive research. For example, in an effort to judge the quality of inclusive health research the International Collaboration for Participatory Health Research (ICPHR) (2013) has identified six concepts of 'validity':

- Participatory validity: the extent to which all stakeholders are able to take an active part in the research process to the full extent possible;
- Intersubjective validity: the extent to which research is viewed as being credible and meaningful by the stakeholders from a variety of perspectives;
- Contextual validity: the extent to which the research relates to the local situation;
- Catalytic validity: the extent to which the research is useful in terms of presenting new possibilities for social action;
- Ethical validity: the extent to which the research outcomes and the changes exerted on people are sound and just; and
- Empathic validity: the extent to which the research has increased empathy among participants.

In the field of learning disabilities, Nind and Vinha (2012, 43-44) propose that 'good social science research practice' meets 'good inclusive research practice' when:

- 1) The research answers questions we could not otherwise answer, but that are important.
- 2) The research reaches participants, communities and knowledge, in ways that we could not otherwise access.
- 3) The research involves using and reflecting on the insider, cultural knowledge of people with learning disabilities.
- 4) The research is authentic (recognised by the people involved).
- 5) The research makes impact on the lives of people with learning disabilities.

A useful debate for inclusive research in education would address the extent to which education as a discipline needs a distinctive set of criteria with which to judge quality inclusive research. A closer inspection of the debates within the papers in this special suggests that two alternative criteria might potentially form the basis of a framework for evaluating the quality of inclusive research in education: ethicality and reciprocity. Whilst the ICPHR talks of examining the ethical validity of the outcomes of inclusive research, several papers in this issue focus on judging the ethics of the process of doing inclusive research. Black-Hawkins and Amrhein position inclusive research as being about taking an ethical stance. MacLeod et al. talk of inclusive research as being ethically desirable and how it can be achieved through the development of equitable and respectful relationships between researcher and participant. Hall argues that in striving to do better, researchers should reject a surface approach to research ethics. She positions ethical practice within inclusive research as involving respect, reciprocity and obligation. The papers offer examples



of the ethical challenges that can be experienced when doing inclusive research in education. For example, Mearns et al. write about the ethical issues that arose concerning whether and how the research interfered with schoolwork and inclusion. Weilikali and Atkins write about the challenges of supporting the ethical practices of the learners when they take on the role of co-researcher. The ways in which researchers strive to address these ethical issues might serve as indicators of quality. In addition to ethicality, several papers in this issue focus on reciprocity. Hall, for example, argues that 'ongoing negotiated reciprocal relatedness' (XX) should underpin inclusive research. Such negotiated reciprocity might be achieved through honest criticality and establishing a climate of trust (MacLeod et al.) whereby both researcher and participant might be entrusted with specific responsibilities (Mearns et al.). The extent to which inclusive research in education is successful in establishing genuine reciprocity might serve an indicator of quality. This special issue cannot solve the conundrum of what it means to do research that is of high quality and with high inclusive *and* educational value, but it makes a contribution to this important project.

## Notes

[1] Towards equal and active citizenship: pushing the boundaries of participatory research with people with learning disabilities See: <http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/project/F0259B9B-5461-47B9-A33D-88A9614812AD>

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