

‘The turn toward democratisation of research – what does it mean for education?’

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Abstract: Social theory helps us to see the social movements that we are living through (or alongside). One such global movement is democratisation with the shifts towards broader and greater consultation and participation in decision-making. Research has inevitably been touched by (and arguably adds to) this democratisation, with research relationships and the power dynamics within them coming under the spotlight. There is a flourishing movement towards more participatory, emancipatory, co-produced or inclusive research involving a stronger sense of dialogue between the researchers and the researched or even a more radical shift in these roles. The drivers for this are complex and include pragmatic, some might say cynical moves by academics as well as principles positions and grass roots campaigns technological change has acted as a catalyst or enabler for some. In this keynote presentation the democratic turn in research will be examined, both in terms of what it means for the people involved and what it means for research. Against this background, the implications for educational research and in turn for education are explored. The questions raised include: What is old and what is new in all this? Where do trade-offs become inevitable when research becomes more inclusive? And how might the potential for bringing about educational change (for example towards inclusive education) be exploited?

1. Democratization

Democratization as a concept does not solely apply to the commonly associated context of national or regional politics. It is also applied to organizations in the reform of their power structures, to the internet which is often upheld as a site for democratic control by the people, to design which is conducted with end-users, and to knowledge as it becomes more accessible to ordinary people and out of the control of elite groups such as academics. The digital age is accredited with being key to developments in the democratization of knowledge but historically this has come from people organizing together to create, for example, libraries for miners. As researchers, the products of our projects are increasingly been made available to everyone rather than just to those who can afford library or journal subscriptions. Attention has even turned to the possibility of democratic universities with community decision-making structures and questions raised about ‘ownership’ and accountability [1]. The democratization movement is also associated with the UNICEF drive for Rights Respecting Schools which teach children about their rights and which model ‘rights and respect in all its relationships: between teachers / adults and pupils, between adults and between pupils’ [3].

Inevitably then, democracy and its processes mean different things to different people; for now we might agree with the definition of Charles Tilly (2007, p.59) that it is about ‘net movement toward broader, more equal, more protected, and more mutually binding consultation ... a dynamic process that always remains incomplete and perpetually runs the risk of reversal’ [2]. According to Graham

Smith [4] democracy demands that citizens have the capacity to participate in the critical decisions that affect their lives, and democratic institutions (or research projects!) should be designed to enable their participation. Referring to his book *Democratic Innovations* [5] he describes the democratic goods that come with democracy as: inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgment and publicity. I will be concerned particularly with inclusiveness in this presentation.

2. The democratization turn in research

Context: It would be strange if the turn to democratization did not reach research. While it is difficult to map how the two relate to each other in precise terms, the democratization of research is widely evident. This has happened under various banners: participatory research, emancipatory research, community research, partnership research, user-led research, feminist action research, decolonizing research and so on. The variety here is indicative of this being not one coherent movement but a series of related movements. In the book *What is Inclusive Research?* [6] I use 'inclusive research' as an umbrella term to encompass family of types of research that 'reflect a particular turn towards democratization of the research process' (p.1). There are nuanced differences in what each term refers to as well as differences related to discipline and geographical place in the world. Yet they all capture a reaction against a dominant research tradition to instead embrace ways of researching that actively engage communities in mutual inquiry processes for the good of the community involved.

Definitions: I do not want to lose you in the messiness of these multiple movements that I am bringing together and calling inclusive research. Therefore at this juncture I clarify that I am talking about research that in some way changes the dynamic between research/researchers and the people who have traditionally been the subjects of that research. The very shift in language in social research from talking about research subjects to research participants reflects this shift, with 'participant' sometimes implying greater control over the research process than is actually involved [7]. The discourse is changing from research *on* people who are the objects or subjects of research, to research *with* those people, and perhaps *by or for* them. (This is turn has spawned a whole range of new terms trying to capture the shifting roles: co-researcher, peer researcher, lay researcher etc.) The debates are also changing such that now researchers will be asking questions such as:

- Who owns this research problem?
- Who is the initiator of the project?
- In whose interests is the research?
- Who has control over the processes and outcomes?
- How is the power and decision-making negotiated?
- And ultimately, who produces the knowledge claims and owns the research?

In **participatory research**, the democratic principle of participation is foregrounded. For Cancian (1989) participatory research involves democratic relationships to produce knowledge which incorporates participants' everyday knowledge to solve problems [8]. For Bourke (2009) it involves research participants in the decision-making and conduct of the research [9]. For Byrne et al (2009) this implies meaningful partnership and meaningful social transformation [10]. The kinds of expertise held by academics is de-privileged and brought into dialogue with the knowledge held by so-called 'experts by experience', those who live with learning disability, use services and so on. A

major debate in participatory research concerns whether participation can be enhanced by particular techniques such as photo elicitation or child-friendly methods, or whether a paradigm shift is required.

In *emancipatory research*, the control of the research is not so much shared, but taken over by those who are implicated in it. Emancipatory research is usually associated with activism as in disability politics where this is an angry response to way research has traditionally placed a professional gaze on disabled people, with academics seen as studying them for their own benefit and adding to their oppression. Controlling research is a way of control the knowledge generated about you. For Oliver (1997) this is less about changing the rules of the game and more about changing to a different game altogether [11]. Emancipatory research by practitioners is owned by them and empowers them [12]. Emancipatory research is less about active citizenship and more about activism [13].

It can be useful to think about this spatially as Thomson does [14]. Academics may invite others into their space as researchers, community groups may invite academics into their space, or the two might work together on the creation of new spaces [15]. The spaces may be closed with just selected people invited in or they may be claimed or created spaces. Torre (2005), for instance, describes 'creating *democratic spaces of radical inclusivity*' in which

- 'each participant is understood to be a carrier of knowledge and history,
- everyone holds a sincere commitment to creating change for educational justice,
- power relationships are explicitly addressed within the collaborative,
- disagreements and disjunctures are excavated rather than smoothed over, and
- there is a collective expectation that both individuals and the group are "under construction"' [16].

3. The ABC of inclusive research

It may help us to think about inclusive research in terms of the antecedents, behaviours and consequences.

Antecedents/Drivers: The democratic turn in research is an evolving set of practices influenced by a range of factors. We can think of these as (i) academic and (ii) more broadly oriented. In academic terms, the strengthening of qualitative research against positivist traditions was a reflection on the hierarchal relationships in research and a concern with giving participants greater voice, seeing things better from their perspective [17]. Involving them in the design and conduct of research was in some ways a logical next step, working with the idea that all knowledge is socially constructed to question who should be doing the constructing and, furthermore, accredited with that construction. The emergence of the disciplines of international development, disability studies and childhood studies, for example, challenged the ways in which disabled people and children were seen as passive objects and increased awareness of their agency, voice and rights as active meaning-makers. Academics also learned that engaging participants in more active roles helped them to access 'hard-to-reach' groups, extended their networks, and facilitated the process of the increasingly important 'impact' beyond the academy.

In the wider social milieu, key influences include the democratic turn more widely [18] and policy interest in civic engagement, the United Nations Conventions (on the Rights of the Child for

example), the push from grass roots organizations, the culture of service user choice and associated emphasis on customer feedback and evaluation, and technological advances. One might add to this the growth of mistrust in research perhaps and a desire to make it better. Indeed, the concern with righting wrongs should not be under-estimated. Smith wrote her 1999 first edition of *Decolonizing Methodologies* [19] in order to disrupt the hierarchical relationships between non-indigenous researchers and indigenous researchers and between the colonizers of knowledge and colonized, subjugated peoples. Researcher power had been used to colonize, but also to label [20], medicalise and pathologies [21] and the desire to do research differently has been strong amongst particular groups.

Behaviour: Within this environment a number of research behaviours have evolved, such as:

- Using advisory or steering groups made up of people from the group being researched to help ensure that the project is conceived and conducted in ways that are respectful and involving of participants.
- Searching for methods that position participants in more active roles. Woodward (2008), for example, describes how digital photography is used in the method of photo-elicitation to disrupt power relationships [22]. With participants in control of taking photographs and explaining their significance to them the research relationship shifts such that roles are reversed, dialogues opened up, and participants are active in the co-production of knowledge. Young people have taken up video diary methods and taken control of them [23]. Some studies have stressed giving choice to participants over the methods they engage with [24].
- Seeing a new gold standard in which participants (or representatives from their group) are involved at every stage in the research process [25].
- Finding new ways of doing co-analysis and making the analysis process accessible to lay researchers [26].
- Exploring new teamwork arrangements for research [25, 27].
- Lay researchers taking on new roles in (co-)writing papers and in peer review of papers and funding applications.

Consequences: The above has culminated in a good knowledge base developing regarding the practical challenges of research. There have been many papers published about how the new power dynamics are negotiated [28], meeting the training requirements of lay researchers [29], and what works in doing research inclusively [30]. There have been claims that making research participatory/inclusive equates with making it more ethical [30] and with generating more authentic and worthwhile knowledge [31]. The otherwise marginalised people who have become involved in doing research, such as people with learning disabilities or mental health difficulties, have testified to the benefits to them in terms of new networks, skills, status and self-esteem [25, 32]. There have also been counter-arguments [33] and attempts to disconnect any automatic association between the participatory nature of research and its likelihood of being ethical, better, or more emancipatory [34, 35, 36]. The potential costs as well as benefits of democratizing research are rarely discussed but these have been identified by Staley [33]. Edwards & Alexander refer to the 'trade offs' between inclusivity and rigour [18], and I have been researching what inclusivity means for quality in research. I have argued elsewhere that we may have learned more about inclusive research than we have

learned through it, and that in the next generation of inclusive research the focus will shift from its processes to its products [37].

4. Inclusive research in education

It is hard to gauge your response to these ideas. From your perspective as people involved with education I expect that some of you will be thinking that this all sounds rather like a re-working of the teacher research and action research from decades ago that we might associate with Lawrence Stenhouse and the like [38]. Others will be thinking that you cannot bring to mind many examples of inclusive research in education. You will both be right to my mind. Moves to engage teachers actively in research are not new; what is more innovative perhaps is the move to engage pupils in research and to see the research as co-created rather than the more common making use of the voices of teachers, and perhaps learners, but with academic researchers still firmly in control. Teacher-researchers of course blur the researcher-researched role boundaries, but very little teacher-research makes it beyond dissertations for continuing professional development courses and into the domain of the published literature [39]. The bulk of attention paid to democratizing research has been in fields concerned with marginalised groups who are seen to benefit most from it [40]. While teachers have in pockets become agents of their own inquiry, the disruption to research relationships has been more prominent in feminist research, disability studies, childhood research, social work and social geography where the discussion about these issues happens more often than not [41].

I have been perplexed about why my own field of inclusive research has not been the site of more inclusive research. Bearing in mind that they share in common social values, a concern with socially just ways of doing things (education or research) and with bringing people from the margins to active participation in central roles, one might expect that they regularly inform each other [41]. Both call for radical reorganization of the organizational structures and sustaining traditional practices, be they the separation of learners perceived to be of different abilities or hierarchical relationship between researchers and researched in the form of research methods or designs. Interestingly, in both there are those who see the new inclusive version as different in kind from the old version [11, 42, 43, 44] and there are those who see more of a continuum [36, 45], a difference in emphasis rather than kind [46] or messy in-between-ness [47]. Both are ethically appealing [36, 49], seeking to redress previous exclusionary wrongs [44, 49]. They share 'a strong ethical component about this being the right, if not the easiest, thing to do and a sense that the competences of those driven to the margins have been underestimated' [41].

When inclusive research approaches have been employed this has taken the form of teachers as change agents in participatory action research style projects, such as the UK action research network *Understanding and Developing Inclusive Practices in Schools* [50], or in studies that attempt to empower teachers as producers of knowledge such as the *Accessible Research Cycle* [51]. The principles have been evident in studies connected with the pupil/student voice movement with pupils learning research skills and roles and broadening the understanding of others with their different ways of knowing. In these there is a 'sense of collective action and activity' [52]. The European 'INCLUDE-Ed' project [53] is perhaps most noteworthy for bringing the contributions of all 'educational agents' into dialogue to 'produce usable knowledge' based on solidarity for transforming educational realities.

5. Inclusive research for education

There comes a point in a presentation like this when we cannot avoid asking ‘so what?’ You might have preferred that I got to this earlier! I have brought this topic to your attention for this conference because I am excited by the potential that the democratization of research offers to education. Graham Smith [4] has recently rehearsed the view of the sceptic: “It will just be the usual suspects”; “There will be no impact on final decision making”; “People don’t know enough to make good judgements”; “Participation is too expensive and time consuming”; “People don’t want to participate”; “It only works at the local level”. All this is, without doubt, possible. But it is not inevitable. In inclusive research that demonstrates quality both in its inclusivity and its research we stand to be able to: answer important questions we might not otherwise be able to answer, reach participants we might not otherwise be able to reach, critically reflect on insider and outsider knowledge, conduct research recognized as authentic by those implicated by it, and make a difference [32].

Set against the democratic turn it makes sense that teachers, learners (and other educational agents) should be involved in shaping the research questions that are asked, the methodologies and also the findings if they are to trust them. If the educational community is more integrally invested in, party to, and involved in co-producing research knowledge, then trust in that knowledge should follow. The *What Works* agenda de-skills teachers as professionals, asking them only to act in ways proven to be effective by other people’s research [54]. The move to inclusive research in contrast, places that research in their hands should they want this and see the benefit of it. Mutuality and ‘radical collegiality’ [55] in the research endeavour stands to transform what it means to be a teacher, student and researcher, making the change to participation in the conduct of research potentially emancipatory and exciting.

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