

EDITORIAL

Education as a catalyst for the social inclusion of people with learning disabilities

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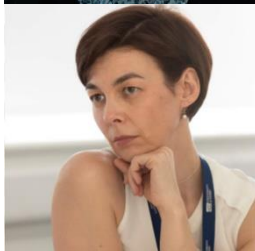
Accessible Summary

- The social inclusion of people with learning disabilities is an important topic because we all have a right to participate in society.
- Articles in this special issue talk about how education can help to make social inclusion better so that people with learning disabilities can join in and belong, just like everyone else.
- The articles talk about how changes in the way people think about learning disabilities can help make education better at making social inclusion happen.
- They also talk about how this can happen by supporting transitions to adulthood (for example into paid work), learning in universities, and getting people with learning disabilities involved in writing courses about health.

This editorial was written by the guest editors:



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Authors from many countries wrote an article for this special issue:



Sweden

Norway

Ireland

England

Indonesia

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from Noun Project

This is what we say in our editorial:



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Social inclusion is an important topic.

We know that people with learning disabilities often feel left out of society

We know that people with learning disabilities have more difficulty getting paid work and being healthy.

We know that education can do things to help make social inclusion better for people with learning disabilities



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People can get left out of society for all sorts of reasons.

Researchers need to find out how education can help people with learning disabilities to join in at school, at work, and in leisure activities like sport.

Researchers also need to find out how education can make it easier for people with learning disabilities to join in with life in the community, so they feel useful, important and valued.

This special issue provides some new ideas about how education could change things for the better.

1. Introduction

Our editorial for this special issue on 'Education as a catalyst for social inclusion' is divided into two sections. The first section focuses on the gaps in applied research in learning disability that this issue attempts to address. The second section outlines how each of the articles in this issue broadens our understanding of how education may catalyse (or sometimes restrict) social inclusion. These articles combine to enrich the data and debate available to people with learning disabilities, their families and advocates, policy makers and professional leaders about how to strengthen education's capacity to enrich social inclusion.

2. Education as a catalyst for social inclusion in the lives of people with learning disabilities

As an indication of the importance and timeliness of this special issue, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE, Symeonidou, 2018) has explored the question of how education can promote social inclusion in the interactive areas of education, employment, and life in the community. Drawing a relationship between broadly inclusive educational practices and short-term social inclusion during life after school, the EASNIE (Symeonidou, 2018) called on researchers to explore this relationship. This was to develop a better understanding of how education might become more powerful as a catalyst for sustaining social inclusion through the life-course. This Special Issue is an international response to that call. It is also a response to the global concern to improve social inclusion as a marker and enabler of a dignified life for people with learning disabilities (Van Asselt, Buchanan and Peterson, 2015).

The special issue is also timely when set within the global context. The United Nations (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UNDESA, 2019) has reviewed progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals for persons with disabilities to find that there is much work still to do to remove barriers to social inclusion. Considering the promotion of full and productive employment and decent work (Sustainable Development Goal, SDG 7), UNDESA (2019, p. 33) report that

persons with disabilities 'continue to have limited access to the employment market', noting that in some countries, the employment to population market ratio for disabled people is almost half that of people without disabilities. In education (SDG 4), more than ten per cent of children with disabilities were refused access to school and a quarter reported that their schools were not accessible or hindered them. In terms of access to community life and relationships, we also know that people with learning disabilities are more disadvantaged. They are more likely to experience impoverished living conditions and exclusion from family and community activities and they are less likely to be employed (Simplican, Leader, Kosciulek and Leahy, 2015). Research has illustrated how many people with disabilities experience stigma and isolation, and how this in turn exacerbates poverty (Samuel, Alkire, Zavaela, Mills and Hammock, 2016). In this context, the question of how to enrich social inclusion through education becomes pressing.

What do we mean by social inclusion and education in this issue? The concept of social inclusion is modelled as the complex, process by which people with learning disabilities can take part in society through being reciprocally active in its *spaces* (e.g., family, community, socio-political), *services* (e.g., education, health, welfare), *markets* (e.g., employment, consumption, finance) and *customs* (e.g., sexuality, festivals, relationships, religion, arts) (Koller, Pouesad and Rummens, 2017). Similarly, the term *education* is widely interpreted to include formal and informal routes to learning (such as schooling, vocational training, careers education, health education, transitions after school, arts-based learning) across the life-course. The papers in this special issue combine to offer new insights into how these educational practices may offer pathways to the enrichment of social inclusion.

This leads us to the question of how *enrichment* in social inclusion is conceptualised in this issue. Researchers in the field have investigated enrichment by examining the scope of social inclusion for people with learning difficulties. For example, through measuring the number of friendships that an individual may have in their close-to-home, private domain (McVilly, Stancliffe, Parmenter and Burton-Smith, 2006). Other studies have measured the quantity of relationships in community settings to argue that social inclusion is underdeveloped if relationships do not also extend into the public sphere (Bates and Davis, 2004). Here, enrichment of social inclusion is a

matter of *quantity* because its enrichment can be identified when the number of relationships and the range of sites where those relationships are active, is expanding. Research has also investigated the enrichment of social inclusion with reference to depth in relationships. For example, whether individuals experience being a valued and trusted contributor to a community rather than simply being present in it (Brown, Cobigo and Taylor, 2015), and the extent to which they encounter positive attitudes to disability in mainstream community settings (Merrells, Buchanan and Waters, 2017). From this perspective, social inclusion is understood to be enriched when relationships develop to be more valuing and reciprocal. This means that enrichment is seen to happen when the quality of relationships improves.

The Special Issue holds a *quantity* and *quality* model of enrichment for social inclusion (Simplican et al., 2015) to recognise education's potential contribution in two interacting areas. Firstly, and in relation to quantity, how education can enable participation in an expanding range of community sites (which may include post-compulsory education, workplaces, or forums for activism) through constructing *opportunities* for participation whilst developing *capacities* for participation (Hall, 2016). Secondly, in relation to quality, how education can enrich the subjective experience of belonging, value and reciprocity. The articles in this special issue combine to provide a uniquely diverse account of education's role in both of these areas throughout the life course, for example, through exploring how Supported Internships scaffold participation in expanding community sites, and through identifying where prevailing practices and attitudes in schools serve to construct social exclusion rather than social inclusion in life after school.

While there is a substantive body of research about social inclusion for people with learning disabilities within school and adult life, the manner in which educational programmes or practices might enrich the quantity and quality of social inclusion through the life course has needed further exploration (Baumgartner and Burns, 2014). There has been a clear need for more research that focuses on 'designing and promoting interventions that can increase the quantity and quality of social inclusion for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in our communities' through the lens of an ecological, ecosystemic model (Simplican et al., 2015, p. 28). This is because of growing support for a socio-ecological model (SEM)

of social inclusion (Purdey Greenaway and Turetsky, 2019). In essence, SEM positions the individual at the centre of expanding systems to note the manner in which social inclusion is impacted by the interaction of positive or negative forces close to the individual (the interpersonal context) with those that are further from the individual (the community and then the socio-political context). Hence, the quantity and quality social inclusion is affected by interaction between the individual, the community and the environment to include physical, social and political factors. SEM is useful for applied researchers because it models the complexity of factors involved in the enrichment of social inclusion for people with learning disabilities. It also reframes the challenge for the research and educational community, in a manner that has shaped the content of this special issue.

Turning to the challenge for educators, SEM demands a shift of focus from education as a site for interpersonal participation, to education as a scaffold for authentic community participation (Walsh, Holloway and Lydon, 2018). This means that the remit of educators is seen to expand from the preparatory development of skills and dispositions for community participation as these would unfold within a well-designed, inclusive learning programme (Asmus et al., 2017), to development within the 'real world' site of participation (e.g., the workplace, the sport, the advocacy group). This also demands that educators work actively *within* the site of participation to shape supports, adaptations and culture change such that individuals with learning disabilities can take part in a genuine and meaningful way (Louw et al., 2020). Consequently, educators must work in partnership with community organisations (such as workplaces) and view the tribulations, complexities and uncertainties associated with managing such partnerships as a core part of their work in enriching social inclusion for people with learning disabilities (Schneider and Hattie, 2016). For researchers, this shift also demands attention to how educators and educational programmes operate in this space, how members of the target community mediate the enrichment or diminishment of social inclusion (Louw et al., 2020), and how outcomes come about through the interaction of interpersonal relationships and community participation. The content of this special issue makes an important contribution to the study of these phenomena, for example through exploration of how photovoice can serve as a resource for community activism for

people with learning disabilities, and how a co-constructive approach to health education can create pathways to social inclusion.

Core to this special issue, is recognition of the capacities and capabilities of people with learning disabilities as trustworthy agents of contribution in society. Inherent in our approach to this special issue and the articles contained within it, is our concern with how education too can recognise people with learning disabilities in this way.

3. Education and social inclusion in this issue

The first two articles in this issue explore how the upending of norms, can open up new pathways to the enrichment of social inclusion for people with learning disabilities at the interpersonal and community level.

Mhairi Beaton, Geraldene Codina and Julie Wharton focus on the ways COVID-19 restrictions have provided opportunity for a “new normal” for people with learning disabilities. Whilst acknowledging that COVID-19 restrictions have negatively impacted the lives of children with learning disabilities, the authors focus on new ways of working that have come to light because of the pandemic, and at this early stage, appear to be beneficial to the social inclusion of children with learning disabilities. Findings from their study indicate that some of the changes resulting from the impact of the pandemic have afforded children with learning disabilities enhanced opportunities for social inclusion: increased power/agency for children and their families, new modes of connectedness leading to enhanced relationships with key stakeholders, and the increased timeliness of reviews.

The *In Response* paper to this article written by John Paul Donnelly focuses on the work of the Glasgow Disability Alliance (GDA) during the pandemic and the ways this organisation responded quickly to support its members. Donnelly also reflects on the technological progress made in the last twenty years and how this made possible a “new normal” in schools for people with learning difficulties. Beaton, Codina, Donnelly and Wharton all reiterate the need to tackle digital exclusion for children/young people with disabilities. Crucially as Donnelly points out, changes

made to services for children with learning disabilities should be informed and shaped by the views of children with learning disabilities and their families.

Michelle Bonati and Elga Andriana discuss how photovoice can be used to support social inclusion, belonging and community for students with learning disabilities. Thirty-one students with and without disabilities took photographs and thematically analysed them during individual interviews and group discussions in two Indonesian schools. The authors argue that photovoice provides an inclusive pedagogical approach that can address curricular goals, while supporting social inclusion for students with learning disabilities. The findings are particularly relevant in understanding how photovoice provides opportunities to amplify the voices of students with disabilities to develop a sense of agency for transforming the communities in which they live, and in so doing, develop more reciprocal relationships, and a sense of valued contribution within those communities.

The next four articles in the special issue explore the way that education can enrich (or limit) social inclusion through supported transition work.

Anders Gustavsson, Christian Wendelborg and Jan Tøssebro take an in-depth interpretation of two published Norwegian studies that focus on upper-secondary education for students with intellectual disabilities and their school-to-work transitions. Their analysis of the characteristics of Norwegian upper-secondary education reveals a hidden curriculum that underlines the notion of training for “realistic” futures. This hidden curriculum, which is reinforced by the social security support systems, paves the way for social exclusion and a graduate life consisting, mostly, of welfare services. Calling for a break away from the vicious circle of low expectations and exclusion from the labour market, the authors call for a radical change of perspectives and the introduction of educational goals and programmes oriented towards a diversity of adult roles, not just welfare consumption. Such changes will require a multi-agency discussion between teachers, school leaders and professionals in the employment and welfare services regarding the nature of authentic societal participation.

Jill Hanson, Deborah Robinson and Geraldene Codina analyse the ways a supported internship programme in England deepened and broadened the social

inclusion of young people with a learning disability. Reporting that young people with learning disabilities find it challenging to gain employment, the supported internship programme featured in this article provides young people with a one-year work-based experience that: is person-centred rather than impairment focussed; advocated for by a job coach; and includes placements in varied departments. The findings of this study show the supported internship was an important catalyst for the development of the young people's positive self-concept and an initiator of positive relationships with a wider range of people (including work colleagues). The practices relevant to these findings are outlined and critically analysed within this paper.

Hannah Blake, Jill Hanson, and Lewis Clark conducted research into the inclusivity of school and college alumni networks to people with learning disabilities. Seventeen members of staff from six schools and colleges across the Leeds City region discussed how alumni networks for people with learning disabilities in their educational setting could be beneficial in promoting social inclusion. The findings of this research show that schools/colleges are aware of the importance of creating an inclusive alumni network and recognised the benefits this could bring to their schools and their learners with learning disabilities. The author attend to improving individual outcomes for people with learning disabilities, enhancing interpersonal relationships, and improving organisational culture such that young people's transition into an included adulthood is supported.

Geraldine Scanlon and Alison Doyle explore through interviews, the experiences of 31 students with intellectual disabilities who were engaging with or who had engaged with a model of supported transition (i.e. WALK PEER programme) to promote autonomy and choice in post-school options in the Republic of Ireland. After interviewing students in 'pre-transition', 'during transition' and 'post-transition' phases, the authors concluded that supported transition activities can translate into positive futures when we give the opportunity to young people to voice their dreams and aspirations. The authors note that the development of a national transition framework to facilitate progression from school to further education training and employment will ensure better futures for these students. They also propose stronger policies on supported transitions through more participation of the young people with

intellectual disabilities giving them the opportunity to exercise their rights to autonomy and choice in the areas of education and employment.

The next paper in this issue centres on the role of higher education in the development of capacities for participation with a particular focus on how people with learning disabilities can be active in facilitating social inclusion for excluded groups. This serves to illustrate the concept of reciprocity in a new way. Natasha Spassiani, Maria Clinice, and Noel Ó Murchadha address the misconception that people with an intellectual disability do not benefit from, and should not be included in, second language learning opportunities. Focussed on a group of six university students with intellectual disabilities, the participants engaged in a focus group to discuss their experiences of learning Irish Sign Language. The findings of this study showed that the participants were able to comprehend the content and felt comfortable using Irish Sign Language in conversations. Participants discussed how learning Irish Sign Language involved adapting their customary learning style (i.e., pen and paper) and challenged them to apply new language learning strategies. Participants also spoke about how learning Irish Sign Language can help them to socially include people from the Irish Deaf community. This is described as an important finding by the authors, as it is likely these students have had few previous opportunities to consider and facilitate the inclusion of others.

The final paper in the special issue explores curriculum co-construction in health education as a pathway to social inclusion, to illustrate how educational programmes can enrich self-esteem and self-determination through the life course. Anne-Marie Martin, Sile Divane, Sandra Twomey, Lucia O'Neill, Joseph McCarthy, Caroline Egan, Caroline Dalto and Maria Caples present a health promotion initiative that was co-produced with people with intellectual disabilities called *Don't Mention the Diet!* Through the involvement of people with intellectual disabilities in the production of an educational module around healthy eating and drinking, the authors demonstrate how students with learning disabilities were assisted to make informed decisions about their diet. The inclusion of students with disabilities in the co-production of the module resulted in active decision making about their lifestyle and health. This article can be particularly useful to those who wish to co-design modules or other learning

tools with people with learning disabilities, especially in providing accessible information rather than telling individuals what to do.

Conclusion

In this Special Issue, content has been assembled to deliver new data and debate on how education can serve as a catalyst for social inclusion. The combined papers present a social-ecological stance on inclusion and represent how education must shift its focus from preparing people with learning disabilities to participate in communities to working *within* those communities as scaffolds for meaningful participation. The Issue shows how education unfolds in community sites, and how outcomes are the consequence of interaction between people with learning disabilities, educators, members of target communities and prevailing cultural norms.

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