

Thinking Inclusively, Acting Inclusively, Researching Inclusively

This paper starts from the core idea that – as teachers or researchers – there is a close interrelationship between what we do, know and believe. However, despite some common ground in terms of thinking inclusively about children and young people with learning difficulties or disabilities, acting inclusively has evolved very differently for teachers and researchers. The paper explores some of the thinking that is sometimes hidden from view but that shapes our practice as teachers or researchers. It presents the author's journey to the concept of doing research inclusively and shows how this differs from doing inclusive research. The paper concludes by arguing that this emphasis on dynamic action rather than naming a phenomenon has exciting potential for education as a catalyst for thinking about teaching inclusively.

Keywords: inclusive education; inclusive pedagogy; inclusive research; participatory research

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INTRODUCTION

This paper charts the intimate relationship between thought and action and how they have developed differently in inclusive education (or more particularly, inclusive pedagogy) and inclusive research. Over a long career, I have been involved in both and so the paper interweaves not just thought and action in professional practice but my own personal journey as both a teacher and researcher. Inevitably this means that I draw on some of my previous papers (Nind, 2014; Nind and Vinha, 2014) and must acknowledge the role of colleagues in helping to shape the arguments presented here.

THE INTRICATE WEB OF DOING, KNOWING AND BELIEVING

Teachers

It was Rouse (2008, cited by Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011) who powerfully observed that, in the context of inclusive classroom practices, there is a close, reciprocal interrelationship between what teachers do, know and believe. This was important for Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011, p. 814) wanting to explore the craft knowledge of teachers, that is to probe “what they do, why and how”, which includes examining what they “know and believe”. I have done much the same with inclusive researchers (Nind and Vinha, 2014) and with teachers of research methods (Nind and Lewthwaite, 2018). It is Hart, Dixon, Drummond and McIntyre (2004) though, who have most powerfully traced the connections between thinking, believing and doing – in their case teachers’ thinking free of the constraints imposed by ability labelling and their actions in the classroom. Their core argument is that “we *create* different types of learners by believing that there *are* different types, and by teaching them accordingly” (p. 30, original emphasis); they go on to show how believing in *everyone* means teaching for *everyone*, charting the reflections and actions of nine teachers and thereby enabling others to see that to do such inclusive work requires thinking such inclusive thoughts.

As teachers we can reflect upon the evolution of what we know – or believe we know – and link it to our practice. For example, once we knew that some learners had special needs, we knew these needs came from something in them, which meant that they did not learn from what we ordinarily provided for them. As a result, so our knowing went on, we (or someone else) had to provide something special for them (often somewhere else). And so we developed special education, believing we were doing the right thing. I want to emphasise two things here. First, while this is deliberate over-simplification and possibly misuse of the inclusive ‘we’, Thomas and Loxley (2001) provide a more nuanced and evidenced account of this evolution. Second, believing we were doing the right thing is important: I am a fiercely in favour of inclusion, but I was also a special education teacher. I was never a sinner or a saint, I just went through a transition in my thinking.

If thinking inclusively is essential to acting inclusively then we need to attend to how changes in thinking occur. Comber and Kamler (2004, p. 295) argue that “disrupting deficit discourses requires serious intellectual engagement by teachers over an extended period of time in ways that foster teacher agency and respect without celebrating the status quo”. This prolonged journey means that we can experience the uncomfortable sense of being on shifting sands. This might mean knowing (or believing we know) that all learners are individuals, but they have

lots in common, and a right not be marginalised and excluded. Therefore, we have to balance the unique, the special and the universal of their needs (Norwich and Lewis, 2005). So we work at inclusive education, believing we are doing the right thing.

The journey in my thinking has happened in part because of my engagement with influential literature. Thomas and Loxley's (2001) *Deconstructing Special Education and Constructing Inclusion* challenges the truth of what had become common sense understanding about special education, shows its cultural roots and argues we need to unpick our thinking before we can think more inclusively. When being in special schools was becoming uncomfortable for me because of a clash of ideology, they showed that special education was a social construct rather than an inevitability. Like Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011), I was hugely influenced by the possibilities for inclusive pedagogy demonstrated in *Learning Without Limits* (Hart et al., 2004). Here inclusive practices were linked – unusually explicitly – to a set of principles concerned with fostering co-agency, working for everybody and trusting the learner. I have also found resonance with the conceptual distinction of Norwich and Lewis (2005) between pedagogic needs common to all learners, pedagogic needs of specific groups and pedagogic needs unique to the individual. I can appreciate how Hart et al. (2004) foreground common needs, how special education has foregrounded group needs and how personalised planning foregrounds individual needs.

This concept of common versus – or together with – unique needs is also helpful when considering those individuals with severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties for whom Intensive Interaction (Nind and Hewett, 1994) has become a widespread way of working. In working on the early development of Intensive Interaction, learners with extreme difficulties, for whom specialised teaching had been presumed needed, became learners with everything in common with other learners. Through the analysis and application of processes from caregiver-infant interaction we have learned to appreciate them as learners who benefit from naturalistic teaching, if it is provided at the necessary level of intensity and reflection, simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary.

Research it seems, along with conversations with colleagues, exposure to campaign groups and engagement with learners, help to change how we think – and act – which brings us nicely to considering how thinking and action in research have also become more inclusive.

Researchers

As researchers, once we knew (or believed we knew) that researchers could find the answers to social and educational questions, we knew that academic knowledge mattered and maybe professional knowledge too. So academic researchers retained their position in charge of the research agenda, sometimes consulting with teachers (but rarely parents, and never children and young people) as we did research *on* them, believing we were doing the right thing. Just as inclusive education is reliant on teachers thinking inclusively, the development of inclusive research has required researchers to think inclusively. We have had to have our discourses about our authority over knowledge disrupted. For me, the most powerful voice in this did not come from disability politics at all but from black feminist politics and bell hooks (1990, p. 151-152) writing:

no need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk.

Many researchers have been troubled by such challenges so that, like teachers, we have been experiencing the sands shifting. Hence, we now know (or believe we know) that researchers do not hold all the answers to social and educational questions, that there are different ways of knowing and that they all matter. Therefore, as academic researchers we understand the need to open up the research agenda, to collaborate with teachers, parents, *and* children and young people as we do research *with* and *for* them, rather than just *on* them, believing we are doing the right thing.

I am deliberately showing a pattern here, and again I identify influences on my thinking and on the field. I have written before (Nind, 2014) about my own personal epiphany on hearing Mabel Cooper, a woman with learning disabilities who had experienced life in a long-stay institution, challenge an academic researcher's archival account of institutional life. Self-advocate Simone Aspis (2000), writing about *Researching Our Own History*, similarly challenged us to think about who owns this knowledge. In their critical paper, *We Are All in the Same Boat*, Lou Townson et al. (2004) extended the argument and claimed the rightful place of people with learning disabilities as researchers of their own lives thus ensuring "we are not following someone else, or being partly included, which also means partly rejected, by someone else" (p. 73). It is not just adults with learning disabilities who have challenged thinking like this; we were equally challenged

in action research with girls excluded from mainstream schools on grounds of behaviour clarified in the words of one of the girls, *If They Don't Listen I Shout and When I Shout They Listen* (Clark et al., 2011). The European 'INCLUDE-Ed' project (Puigvert et al., 2012) has helped to show how in research the voices and claims to knowledge of different parties do not have to be made to compete but can be brought into dialogue.

DOING INCLUSIVE RESEARCH VERSUS DOING RESEARCH INCLUSIVELY

In this second part of the paper I turn to a more subtle change in how I have come to think about inclusive research, that is, to think not about doing inclusive research but about doing research inclusively. The former is a thing with criteria that define it while the alternative is a process that is more fluid and developmental. I then return to teachers and the idea of doing teaching inclusively.

Walmsley and Johnson (2003, p. 16) have three core criteria for inclusive research with people with learning disabilities. It "must address issues which really matter ... and which ultimately leads to improved lives" for people with learning disabilities; it "must access and represent their views and experiences"; and it must reflect "that people with learning disabilities need to be treated with respect by the research community". Here knowing, believing and doing are properly intermingled as the inclusive research project is positioned as a political project and an ethical project. This echoes ideas that inclusive research has a moral imperative: it is "the right thing to do" (Holland et al., 2008). It is about the redressing wrongs of research that has been marginalizing voices, labelling, pathologizing and colonizing certain people, and it addresses the difficult issues of who has the right to ask questions, make decisions, tell people's stories and take the credit.

I became most sharply involved in inclusive research when I set out to explore what constitutes quality in this context (see Nind and Vinha 2012, 2014). I wanted to do this in dialogue with inclusive researchers and set out to create vibrant interactive spaces to make best use of constructive friction within the field. I wanted the dialogue to be transformative in that all of us would be doing more than just 'unveiling' what we knew about inclusive research; engagement with others would help us to, as Freire (1970, p. 51/69-70) puts it, recreate our knowledge and thereby "know it critically", together and not "on behalf of another".

The dialogue meant that we were meeting two worlds – the world of making small practical steps with principles and pragmatics guiding what happened – and the

world of ‘shoulds’ – a feeling that we must maintain some mythical or imposed gold standard for inclusive research. For some researcher-participants and others who have engaged with the study, it was critical that those with learning disabilities should be involved at every stage, that the top rung of Hart’s (1992) ladder of participation be reached, that all the people with learning disabilities should be trained and paid as researchers, or that they should be in charge of all decisions. For others this made attempting inclusive research into a minefield where fear that their efforts could never be good enough was paralysing. This tension led to an epiphany moment for me in which I realised I needed to stop talking about *inclusive research* and starting talking about *doing research inclusively*. Emphasizing the verb – the doing – was intended to liberate and unshackle us from dogma and imposed gold standards. It was about a desire for permission for exploration, diversity and development and a reaction against the idea that inclusive research should become conceptually fixed (Nind and Vinha, 2014)

CONCLUSION: DOING EDUCATION INCLUSIVELY

In this final part of the paper I argue that we need to give teachers space for transformative dialogue too. The inclusive education cause is not helped by endless battles about definitions that can be excluding for teachers and undermine the efforts of individual teachers and teaching teams. In our study we found that there were different models of how people are doing research inclusively and we have tried to celebrate and promote such diversity (Nind and Vinha, 2012, 2014). It is important not to dodge the question of how to do research inclusively and do the research well, but this needs to generate talking points and a recognition of plurality.

The study I have been reflecting upon, and which became known as the *Doing Research Inclusively, Doing Research Well* study offered examples of working in formalised ways, working in improvised ways, and even combining both. It enabled us to characterise the way of working as stressing support (of one group by another), or negotiation (between groups and about power), or interdependency of everyone on each other. I am convinced that teachers doing education inclusively have formalised and improvised practices also. I am reminded for example, of asking trainee teachers to think about a moment when they acted inclusively in the classroom and relaying the story of a moment we captured when filming for the Open University inclusive education courses. The moment involved a teacher getting a poorly, coughing pupil a beaker of water and making brief eye contact when handing it over, all the while continuing to explain something on the board

to the class. The inclusive moment was one in which the teacher recognised this individual pupil's needs and signalled her valuing of that pupil. Trainee teachers have found it helpful to think of teaching inclusively as being made up of many such moments rather than one big unattainable phenomenon defined by others.

The argument in this paper, about the intricate webs we weave between doing, knowing and believing, is fresh for me in current research too. I am working with colleagues and self-advocates to explore how adults with learning disabilities in England and Scotland are re-building social care in a new landscape of austerity and personalisation (see <https://selfbuildsocialcare.wordpress.com>). With the closure of day centres and individuals holding personal budgets, some people are clubbing together to build what sometimes look to us to be very much like old-fashioned day centres! We want to understand the ways in which they might be different because the thinking behind them is coming from grass roots communities. But we are being reminded that unless we can imagine something new, we may re-build what we know. Re-building special education is something that as teachers we need to be wary of, instead giving ourselves space to think and act anew.

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