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The problem of inclusion and invisibility: working with disabled students in HE

Julian Ingle
University of Portsmouth, UK

Presentation abstract

For many, the word 'inclusion' has not only become emptied of meaning but also sets up a problematic contradiction. To be included depends on the willingness of those who hold this power to allow entry. Being allowed entry doesn't change the power relationships but merely allows access to already 'existing cultures, structures and practices' (Biesta, Wainwright and Aldridge, 2022, p.1). For disabled people and minoritised groups, the problem of equity and participation in education is one that runs deep and, for many, extends right the way through their educational trajectories.

What's overlooked and not recognised is the invisible work of being disabled. Similarly, and to paraphrase Donna Williams (1996), from the start, disabled people have been judged from the outside, by their appearances, rather than from the inside and according to how their disability is experienced. This mini keynote opens up a space to discuss the problems inherent in inclusion and what this means for disabled people and other minoritised groups.

Questions:
- Inclusion has been co-opted into HE's performativity agenda; does this create more problems than it pretends to solve?
- How do we acknowledge and understand the invisible work of being disabled?
- As practitioners, how can we create a more authentically democratic environment for disabled people and other minoritised groups in HE?

Keywords: disability; inclusion; invisibility; social justice; education.

Community response

As one of our community keynotes, this session attracted lively discussion on the topic of inclusion and invisibility. This section highlights reflections from some participants of this session:

> I completely agree with the idea that inclusion has been stripped of meaning and was reminded during our discussion about the stock phrases now often used in job adverts in which employers claim to be 'inclusive' and welcoming of those from underrepresented or minoritised groups, while making no real effort to attract, support or make adjustments for those prospective candidates. An important point was raised about not expecting people with disabilities or those within other minoritised groups to constantly take on the emotional labour of sharing their experiences and pushing for change. One possible way to mitigate against this, at least in part, could be what my institution has introduced, a disability forum for students to discuss and raise issues they have experienced with campus accessibility. It has only been introduced recently but I hope it might help to remove the burden slightly from individuals and offer a supportive environment for honest discussion.

> I very much enjoyed the challenging discussion at this table. Julian presented a convincing argument against the use of 'inclusion' as a term. I fully respect the argument – inclusion has become a buzzword. The meaning of the term is unclear – and it has been diluted. Significantly. But should we abandon a term because of that? Shouldn't we reclaim it? Defend it? I guess I am biased as I teach Special Educational Needs, Disability and Inclusion (SENDI). Inclusion is an important milestone in the narrative – away from 'special' education, segregation and integration. Inclusion means something to me. The language, as a whole, around accessibility, diversity and inclusion is problematic. Often, there is too much focus on equality – when really – we should focus on equity. While I might not agree with Julian's conclusion – to step away from inclusion as a term, I fully support ongoing critical debates in this area!

Author's reflection

There's never been a golden age of a democratic and inclusive higher education. And it's worth noting that when today's politicians talk publicly about HE, the majority conceptualise it in terms of their own experiences decades before the massification and hugely changed contemporary contexts. There's often misrecognition of these new topographies at a time when the external pressures faced by the sector, alongside the neoliberalisation of university management and governance, create a complex environment for students and staff. It's a confrontation with this broader context and the need for a democratic higher education that these questions about inclusion addressed.

While I certainly wouldn't want to throw the 'inclusion' baby out with the bathwater, the requirement to continuously interrogate and challenge what we mean by inclusion, its impact and associated practices should be fundamental aspects of our practices. The discourse of inclusion, in other words, the values, dispositions, institutional contexts in which it is manifest, are problematic on many levels. Not the least of which are the structural power dynamic it reproduces in terms of, for example, who decides who or what should be included and on what grounds. This is a dynamic that frequently sustains the barriers and exclusionary practices (as often happens when discussions are limited to physical barriers), as well as the invisible emotional, physical, and intellectual labour of being disabled (often in the name of inclusion).

The discussions spanned a range of themes. It was interesting to observe that those of us with a more direct connection to disability, either personally or through our social connections, highlighted examples we'd experienced of invisibility, powerlessness and the many paradoxes of inclusive practices. There wasn't consensus, which is what you'd hope for but there was recognition of the complexities inherent in these discourses of inclusion, equity, social justice and their manifestations in our universities.

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Author details

Julian Ingle currently works in Academic Development at the University of Portsmouth. Prior to this, he was part of the internationally renowned Thinking Writing team at Queen Mary University of London. He has worked at a number of London universities and then joined the University of Portsmouth as head of section of the Academic Skills Unit. Among other areas, he has published and presented on teaching disciplinary discourse and writing, research-based learning, and how policy and practices impact on minoritised groups in higher education. His current research interests include critical discourse analysis, disability studies and gender identity.

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