

**BOU07556**

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**Title: Inclusive education research and phenomenology**

## **Abstract**

Current debates about ‘quality’ and ‘impact’ in educational research are prompting members of the educational research community to ask whether the distinctive nature and purpose of educational research diminishes its suitability for delivering measurable outcomes, or results that can be predicted or manipulated. Education is a complex concept involving notions of personhood, learning and teaching. Many different approaches and methods are needed to ensure that the educational field is enriched by research that is comprehensive i.e. covering empirical, analytical or theoretical aspects of a field of human endeavour that is constantly changing and developing. Especially in most complex contexts such as inclusive education, as new socio-cultural theories inform the field, traditional epistemologies of ‘special education’ and its positivistic methods of inquiry are being supplemented by qualitative methods, which have gained credibility as valid research tools in education and psychology, and nursing. This paper contends that qualitative research using a phenomenological approach can provide insights into essential meanings of fundamental phenomena within the inclusive education context by exploring the lived experiences of participants in the field.

### *Introduction*

Increasingly federal government policies in Australia are following trends in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, which see education as an arm of economic policy as part of the innovation economy. As a result, research in the field of education is being assessed in terms of ‘quality’ and ‘impact’ as defined by the Research Quality Framework (RQF) (Blackmore & Wright, 2006). The emphasis is on assessing quality in terms of transparency/accountability of the research process, and on the impact that research has in producing measurable outcomes. Outcomes are measured by evidence of economic and social benefit, efficiency and effectiveness in use of research resources, and enhancing Australia’s international standing in research performance. Blackmore and Wright (2006) point out that for researchers in the field of education, the definitions of ‘quality’ and ‘impact’ in the RQF model are contentious issues because the underlying presumptions of what counts as quality and what counts as impact seem to be based on the ‘science’ model i.e. measurable in terms of efficiency, accountability and outcomes.

Blackmore and Wright (2006) argue that in educational research, as a unique field, what counts as quality has to take into account the “the nature and the purpose of educational research” ( p. 10). Pring (2004) reiterates this understanding by arguing that the issues for educational research relate to the distinctive nature of educational practice and enquiry, which is not the same as other practices and forms of enquiry e.g. medical practice and research, or business practice and research. Acceptance of this understanding therefore “imposes certain logical limits on how far the one research tradition can be transferred to the other” (p. 6). Examples of the mismatch include Hargreaves’ (1997) comparison of educational research with medical research through the use of randomized control trials, and the increasing use of business terminology such as *product*, *stakeholders*, *process*, *value-adding*, *efficiency*, *deliverers* and *clients* in discourses about educational policy research. Nor is educational research simply a sub-set of research within the field of social sciences, although educational research can draw upon them when appropriate. There are central issues and concepts in education that educational research needs to attend to (Pring, 2004; Yates, 2006).

### *Defining 'quality' and 'impact' in educational research*

Education is a complex concept involving notions of personhood, learning and teaching. Therefore educational research cannot be reduced, for the sake of simplicity, to something, which is easily measured, or to results that can be predicted or manipulated. Central to educational research is "human activity" (Smeyers & Depaepe, 2003, p. 14). Pring (2004) describes educational research as "the attempt to make sense of the activities, policies and institutions which, through the organization of learning, help to transform the capacities of people to live a fuller and more distinctively human life" (p 17). Yates (2006) adds that, because education is a normative field and politics and times change, there is a need for breadth in educational research from blue-sky and fundamental or 'pure' research, to activity that is more tied to the political agendas of the day. There are different ways in which research in the humanities, social sciences, and education in particular can have 'impact' in terms of contribution to knowledge, and teacher and student engagement in learning that are not measurable in terms of justification of expenditure, or short-term achievement of policy outcomes in evidence-based practice (Yates, 2006).

In the UK the Education sub-panel of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) has proposed that research quality in the unique field of education should be judged on three key measures: originality, significance and rigour (RAE, 2006). The sub-panel argues that originality, and therefore quality, in educational research is gained through engagement with new or complex problems in innovative ways and "the development of innovative designs, methods and methodologies, analytical models or theories and concepts" (p. 4). Significance as a criterion of quality implies that research can be theoretical as well as practical, and provide empirical, analytical or theoretical findings that challenge conceptualizations and audiences - academics, policymakers and practitioners. The sub-panel argues that "evaluating the significance of research include judging its impact on the development of the field, examining contributions to existing debates, and assessing its impact on policy and practice" (p. 5). Rigour is associated with methodological and theoretical robustness and the use of a systematic approach. Traditional qualities of reliability and validity will be complemented by scholarship, integrity, consistency of argument and consideration of ethical issues. In

educational research these dimensions of rigour are different in different types of research and need to be assessed on a case by case basis (RAE, 2006).

Particularly in the complex field of inclusive education it is difficult to judge the quality and impact of research in terms of measurable outcomes. However, if as the RAE asserts, quality and impact are about originality and significance gained through engagement with new or complex problems in innovative and rigorous ways, then engaging with the ongoing and problematic issues surrounding the complex field of inclusive education in innovative ways, from new perspectives, and using methods that are scholarly and ethical will result in quality outcomes which will impact positively on the building of inclusive education communities.

#### *Inclusive education*

In their “attempt to make sense of the activities, policies and institutions which, through the organization of learning, help to transform the capacities of people to live a fuller and more distinctively human life” (Pring, 2004, p.17), researchers in inclusive education have examined different assumptions, beliefs and attitudes about disability and difference, about equity, and about effective inclusion of students with disabilities and/or learning difficulties. They have identified and explored the major approaches to education for children with disabilities, which have developed from these beliefs and assumptions.

#### *Theories of inclusion: ‘special education’ and ‘inclusive education’*

Bourke and Carrington (2007) point out that one of the dominant influences that has shaped professional definitions and practices in ‘special education’ in the past has been the medical/psychological model. This model has emphasised inability and contributed to a dependency model of disability. Labels such as “invalid”, and “handicapped”, and “slow learner” have sanctioned individual medical and negative views of disability. In educational organisations today, there continues to be a tendency to reinforce an individual deficit view of disability. This is because peoples’ beliefs and practice related to teaching students with disabilities are influenced by their past experiences and by how they perceive and define difference and disability in society. Personal definitions and beliefs are crucial because they may legitimate

certain assumptions about disability and associated discriminatory practices (Barton, 1996).

More recently, a sociological view of disability has changed our understanding of difference and has led to a new paradigm (Oliver, 1996). This changing paradigm assumes a different set of beliefs and assumptions and demands different practices in schools (Carrington, 1999). Within a social/cultural framework, the construct of disability does not exist within a person but is influenced by the conventions of social expectations and interactions. It is recognised that students who have disabilities have been isolated and marginalised in their education in the past (Carrier, 1989), and the recent more inclusive approach to education assumes acceptance and respect of difference in our school communities.

However, in schools throughout the world, inclusive education has been used increasingly to refer to the placement of students with disabilities in classrooms alongside their peers (Kugelmass, 2004). It seems that the terms “integration” and “inclusion” are still confused and it is important to differentiate between the two terms. Integration is described as “the process of moving children from special education settings into regular classrooms where they undertake most, if not all of their schooling” (Ashman & Elkins, 1998, p. 526). With integration, there is a focus on helping students with disabilities fit in to the regular classroom. This is because the emphasis is on teaching the “normal” curriculum, and teachers must then consider modifications to meet the needs of students who have a disability (Bourke & Carrington, 2006).

An integration approach does not challenge the organisation and provision of curriculum for students, but modifies the current curriculum and schooling paradigm to accommodate special needs (Bourke & Carrington, 2006). In contrast, an inclusive approach to schooling aims at empowering members in a school community to identify and dismantle actual and potential sources of exclusion that limit opportunities and outcomes for all students, including students who have a disability (Slee, 2003). Inclusive education questions personal assumptions that structure views about schools, teachers, students, teaching and learning; and the interconnectedness between individuals, education and society (Crebbin, 2004).

### *Research that informs inclusive education reform*

Until recently, most inclusive education reform in schools has been designed to inform restructuring of the policy area once called 'special educational needs' (Brodin & Lindstrand, 2007; Slee, 2006), so that schools are 'more inclusive.' Brantlinger (1997), Gallagher (2007) and Forlin (2006) point out that this type of policy and practice reform relies on empirical research aimed at supporting and enhancing special intervention education programs that allow students with moderate and severe disabilities to be included more effectively in mainstream schools. These types of initiatives are supported by research about individual disabilities or learning difficulties, and about adjustments to curriculum and pedagogy to meet individual learning needs. Research also informs the design and development of service delivery arrangements and the professional development of providers. Historically, because student outcomes were individually negotiated and private, accountability was concerned more with compliance with legal requirements based on the assumption that "if procedures are implemented as specified, educational benefit is guaranteed" (McLaughlin & Rhim, 2007). Therefore the emphasis in research about outcomes in inclusive education has been on the development and improvements in the quality and impact of service provision, rather than on the effectiveness of outcomes for students with disabilities.

From a socio-cultural perspective on inclusion however, fundamental reform which aims to value diversity and celebrate difference requires that people involved in inclusive school reform attend closely to: a) understanding the cultural and social institutional settings of schools; b) increasing the participation of students within cultures and actively valuing diversity; and c) decreasing exclusionary pressures in order to achieve a way of life in schools where people are valued and treated with respect for their varied knowledge and experiences (Carrington, 1999). Researchers argue that fundamental reform of the whole approach to schooling is needed based on professional development of whole school communities about inclusion, in ways that attend to underlying social and cultural understandings and attitudes, and pedagogical practices that proceed from such understandings and attitudes (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2004). This type of reform requires extensive whole school approaches for long term positive effects, and research initiatives with key participants, and within

communities (Brodin & Lindstrand, 2007; Millar & Morton, 2007). There are limited empirical measures of outcomes for these types of research initiatives, that are measurable in terms of justification of expenditure, or short-term achievement of policy outcomes in evidence-based practice (Yates, 2006).

Paul, Fowler, & Cranston-Gingras (2007) reviewed seven special education journals and found that overall trend in special education research is still quantitative and emphasises objective, outcomes-based research. As well there is a large volume of quantitative data on the cognitive effects of inclusion on individuals such as students, teachers and parents (Kavale, 2007). Occasionally these studies have been supplemented by qualitative research studies such as case studies and critical analyses of special education, and mixed method approaches (Paul et al., 2007). It seems that the demands for measurable 'quality' and 'impact' in research is promoting and supporting studies that promise outcomes related to efficiency and effectiveness (Forlin, 2006; Furtado, 2005). Often these studies are funded on the basis that programs can be designed and tested for politically desirable outcomes. Examples include programs that can deliver behaviour control or 'risk minimization' (Armstrong, 2006; Slee, 2006), or improved student outcomes in testing regimes (McLaughlin & Rhim, 2007), or improved classroom practices (Gersten & Santoro, 2007).

However, Kershner (2007) argues for more qualitative studies that tap into the social world of the classroom to complement quantitative approaches, because teachers' knowledge does not rely on a body of factual information, but is practical, interactive and responsive to wider political and social change. Studies that tap into the social world of the classroom are especially important where concepts of diversity and difference are concerned. In their research in Flemish primary schools, Ghesquire, Maes and Vandenberghe (2004) argue for the usefulness of qualitative case studies in research on special needs education. They show how thick descriptions of the complex connections amongst factors as diverse as the perceptions of key personnel and the classroom and school contexts can be gained through communicative interaction between researchers and research participants. Research by Ainscow et al. (2006) in the UK, and Carrington and Robinson (2004) in Australia has shown how

evidence gained through practitioner/researcher partnerships has been instrumental in moving practice forward.

#### *New directions in inclusive education research*

Researchers in inclusive education are recognising that, while the philosophical and political debate about inclusion is continuing, school personnel and students are trying to grapple with serious issues about practical application of inclusionary principles ‘at the chalkface’ (Florian, 2007; Slee, 2007). They are beginning to recognize the complementarities of a variety of approaches in delivering quality outcomes for the key personnel in inclusive education contexts. Lawson, Parker and Sikes (2006) have used an auto/biographical narrative approach with classroom teachers and teaching assistants. Bailey and du Plessis (1997) explored principals’ views about inclusion using a grounded theory approach. Salisbury (2006) used qualitative interview data and quantitative indexes of inclusiveness for the same purpose. Similar studies have been done with learning support teachers and classroom teachers using a variety of interpretative research methodologies including interviews, textual analyses, and focus groups (Forlin, 2000; Vlachou, 2006; York-Barr, Sommerness, Duke, & Ghere, 2005).

However, most studies investigating attitudes towards inclusion still employ large scale quantitative methods with surveys and questionnaires, particularly in relation to parents and support personnel (Kavale, 2007).

#### *The ‘lived experience of the classroom’*

If effective inclusive education reform needs to change mind-sets and understandings about success and failure and ability and disability, and what Senge (2000) describes as *industrial-age assumptions about learning*, it will not be an easy task. Attitudes revealed by scale measures often fail to address the issues which Carrington and Robinson (2006) call the “incongruence between espoused beliefs and theory” about inclusive education that observation of behaviour and discourse can reveal (p. 325). They point out that in dealing with the demands of their jobs, educationalists “tend to be unaware of the assumptions, theories or educational beliefs and the implications of these for behaviour and practice” (p. 325). In terms of the rhetoric of inclusive education, educationalists may adopt components of this inclusive platform, but in

reality, in their lived experience in schools there is incongruence between their espoused theory and their theory in use. Research with principals, teachers and other support personnel has revealed this incongruence (See research by Bailey & du Plessis, 1997; Carrington & Robinson, 2006; Westwood & Graham, 2003). The incongruence that is detected through attitudinal studies may relate to a lack of acknowledgement of the pluralist and fluid nature of what inclusion means to all of those in the inclusive education community (Waite, Bromfield, & McShane, 2005). This makes “the concept of ‘measurement’ inappropriate, and the gathering of empirical evidence an extremely difficult task” (Waite et al., 2005, p. 72).

Attention to improving pre-service teacher education, and continuing professional development by providing opportunities for reflection and engagement with people with a range of diverse needs will no doubt support improved knowledge and attitudes towards inclusivity in schools (Forlin, 2006). However research has shown that a focus on professional development or training involving teaching strategies and new curriculum approaches are not sufficient to ‘address the complex changes associated with inclusion (Carrington & Robinson, 2006). Beck and Young (2005) argue that, from a Bernsteinian perspective generic courses emphasising trainability, reflect the need of policy makers to engage with excision from courses of all but the most instrumentally relevant forms of educational theory. This “involves a silencing which abstract real experiences from the power relations of their lived conditions by denying access to forms of knowledge that permit alternative possibilities to be thought” ( p. 193).

The question needs to be asked “What type of research data informs the professional development programs, especially those that emphasize gaining credentials or what Bourdieu calls (1977) ‘cultural capital’?” Research that provides empirical data about attitudes, about learning strategies, adapting whole class interaction, supporting personal care needs, developing social skills etc. are important components of the knowledge and skills needed by key school personnel as they struggle to be more inclusive of all students. But such communicative and interactive practices can be “understood only in the light of how the teachers and the learners perceive what they are doing” (Pring, 2004, p. 110). Inclusive education policy needs to be informed by

research that investigates not only the knowledge and attitudes, and the administrative and pedagogical strategies of principals, teachers, teacher aides, parents – their *espoused theory*, but also their experiences as they go about their daily work in enacting inclusive strategies and programs – *their theory in use*. How can research throw light on “how the teachers and learners perceive what they are doing” (Pring, 2004)? How can research better inform initiatives aimed at challenging the perceptions and attitudes that underpin pedagogical and support practices in inclusive settings?

#### *Addressing the complexity of inclusive education development*

For professional development to engage educators’ minds and hearts, and permit alternative possibilities to be thought, it should be informed by research that begins with acknowledgement of the currency of their lived experiences, their theory in use. Exploring this practice i.e. the lived experience of practitioners can provide insights into the meanings of the basic phenomena that make inclusion what it is e.g. what constitutes support for students with disabilities and learning difficulties in the everyday life of the school? These meanings, the theories in use, need to be investigated, and utilized as a source of data to inform the process of engagement with, and movement towards, fresh insights and understandings, at a personal and then a communal level. It is in addressing these types of issues that phenomenology can be a valuable research tool.

#### *Why phenomenology?*

Phenomenology is a qualitative approach. The qualitative or interpretivist approach emerged in contradistinction to attempts to apply positivist methodologies in the human sciences. In contrast to positivists who seek to identify universal features of humanhood, society and history through value-free, detached observation and to offer explanations of human phenomena that bring control and predictability, interpretivists look for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world (Crotty, 1998). Qualitative approaches seek to portray a world in which reality is socially constructed, complex and ever-changing (Glesne, 1999). Therefore qualitative methodological approaches tend to be based on recognition of the

subjective, experiential 'lifeworld' of human beings, and description of their experiences in depth (Patton, 2002).

A qualitative approach that has been used successfully in educational research is the phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is defined as the interpretive study of human experience in which phenomena are examined and clarified through the human situations, events and experiences "as they spontaneously occur in the course of daily life" (von Eckartsberg, 1998, p. 3). Phenomenology investigates the very nature of a phenomenon: not an explanation for it, but a description of it as it appears in consciousness. Phenomenology asks "what something 'is', and without which it would no longer be what it is" (van Manen, 1997, p. xv).

Phenomenology recognises that truths are grounded in human experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) and gathering everyday descriptions of experience can provide a way to get "back to the things themselves"(Giorgi, 1985, p.8) . Crotty (1998) says that phenomenology allows the possibility for new meanings for phenomena to emerge or at least an authentication and enhancement of former meaning through the laying aside, as best we can, of the prevailing understandings of those phenomena. Phenomenology is the study of phenomena as people experience them.

#### *Phenomenology and educational research*

Van Manen (2002) believes that all educators should pursue a phenomenological sensitivity to their lived experience in order to see the significance of the phenomenon, and to find a language in the research process which can "contribute to one's pedagogic thoughtfulness and tact" (p. 2). In the field of inclusive education, pedagogic thoughtfulness and tact are particularly important as educational personnel adjust to changing perspectives about inclusive education. Whether their local community is using a reformed 'special education' approach, or their school is undergoing systematic reform in terms of review of fundamental assumptions about disability and diversity, and how to support students, there are underlying phenomena that need to be examined.

### *Phenomenological educational research studies*

Phenomenological studies by Groenewald (2003), Reinsel(2004) and Willis (1999) have explored educational phenomena by using hermeneutic and existential psychological phenomenological approaches, which have focussed on the lived experience of teachers and students in various educational settings. In South Africa Groenewald (2003) adapted Giorgi's (1985) approach of phenomenological psychology to explore the phenomenon of cooperative education. In Canada, Reinsel (2004) used the approach of hermeneutic phenomenology to explore and provide insights into the phenomena of change experienced by vocational teachers. In Western Australia, Bednall (2006) used a phenomenological methodology to explore the phenomenon of leadership to religiosity.

In relation to inclusive education research, Carrington, Papinczak, and Templeton (2003) used a phenomenological study to investigate the social expectations and perceptions of friendship of a group of teenagers diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. In the UK, Waite, Bromfield and McShane (2005) used phenomenological elements to place value on the affective component of 'voice' as a 'true' measure of quality in their evaluative study of pilot inclusion programs. In New Zealand, Tutty and Hocking (2004) explored the experiences of teacher aides who support students with high support needs. These studies were able to provide insights into the lived experiences of the participants and thereby illuminate meanings for educational phenomena that at times have been radically different from what has been taken for granted i.e. the perceived wisdom (Crotty, 1998). For example, Tutty and Hocking's (2004) findings supported concerns raised in the literature on inclusive education about the implications of the assignment of teacher aides to individual students for the greater part of the day. However the study also highlighted the quality of support that teacher aides provide for students, the responsibilities for collaboration that they are assuming, and raised questions about the quality of teacher involvement in the support role. Carrington et al. (2003) acknowledged the necessity for educational professionals to assist young people with Asperger's syndrome to develop social skills, but highlighted the obligation on designers of social skills programs to recognize and value different persons' social perspectives.

### *Conclusion*

Quality and impact in educational research is not easily defined, let alone empirically measured. In the complex field of inclusive education, researchers continue to seek ways to improve their work in supporting schools to be places that value diversity and celebrate difference. Some of their efforts deliver measurable outcomes in the short term, as improvements in access and equity for students. For others there is no empirical measure, but a long term goal in changing social and cultural expectation so that education is for all (Brodin & Lindstrand, 2007; Shepherd & Hasazi, 2007). Policy makers and practitioners need information on which to base their decisions about reform of education to effectively include all students. Phenomenological studies can make a valuable contribution to a more comprehensive data base for inclusive education reform.

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