

International Journal of Inclusive Education

Audio Interview with Roger Slee, Editor

Interview Transcript

1. For researchers or students who have never encountered the *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, what is the journal about in a nut shell?

When I was thinking about this I went back to the original aim of the journal. Basically it's to make a difference to the research and to the experience of people across education sectors, with regard to trying to dismantle forms of exclusion that people experience across education sectors. That was the basic aim; to make a difference to the quality of the research and hence to policy that was being generated to make a difference. I wanted to provide a platform for different constituencies who were experiencing different forms of exclusion across education, whether it be in higher education, schools, [training] or the pre-schooling sector, to talk about their struggles and to explore the connections that there might be between the different research agendas that were being developed in isolation from each other. So that's the cross disciplinary aspiration, and then the other thing was to look at how exclusion and inclusion operate across cultures and different education jurisdictions internationally. So they were the broad aspirations for the journal when we started.

2. What do you think the journal's aim is and what is its primary focus?

The aims of the journal are to provide a record of the developing research interests into issues of exclusion in education and how barriers are constructed for different groups of more or less vulnerable people in education. So it's looking at the development of the research agenda there. The other aspiration is that it's a useful tool for researchers as they're developing their projects around this and for the community in general. I've always thought that it ought to be a journal that's read by people in schools, in Universities, read by different advocacy groups, read by people in education policy forums as well.

Its primary focus has tended to be around issues of disability in education and connected with that, people working in areas dealing with special educational needs and so on. But I think equally the journal is showing that over time it's starting to touch a lot of other constituencies; so that we're getting more manuscripts dealing with struggles of other groups; so that we're looking at issues around, as I was saying before, issues to do with refugeeism and traveller children; looking at issues for children affected by conflict and war; getting papers around gender issues, and that's always been the case around issues to do with sexuality and education. It's a pretty broad constituency but it always intended to be that, but again predominantly it's around issues of what might be described as special educational needs or disability studies in education.

3. What do you think are the most contentious issues in contemporary debate and research in education which your journal seeks to address?

There's always been a controversy around the relationship between that which is described as inclusive education, and traditional forms of special education. That tends to be distilled

around questions about ideology and the political purpose of inclusive education. A number of researchers within, what I would describe as traditional special education research, question whether it's possible to mount an education project or a research project that has political attachment in terms of an ideological intent and that is to move away from segregated forms of education; whether it's possible to do that and remain scientific. There are controversies around ideology and they've been around for a long, long time and they flare up in the literature from time to time. There was an instance of that I think around 1997 when Ellen Brantlinger published a paper in response to work from Jim Kauffman and so on. Then that flared up again when there was, in another journal, controversy or an outpouring of writing, a critique of Deborah Gallagher's work, who's been a contributor to the journal. So you get that coming and going.

New controversies. I guess the roles of technology and the relationship between technology and education; is it a force for greater levels of inclusion? Will it liberate people and make it more possible for them to have access to education, or does it reinforce the barriers around poverty and disadvantage and so on? So issues around technology, and education assessment is an ongoing area of dispute and critique, and it's been really interesting as somebody coming to this country relatively recently and seeing the recent debacle around SATs, and that, which was held up as a very important plank of education practice here fell apart very, very quickly and was moved away from very quickly. So there are always debates around that and especially in relation to the impact of different forms of assessment on people's learning, whether it contributes to them learning more or actually becomes a barrier. So there have been issues around that. I mentioned refugeeism and education. One thing that I'll be interested in is whether it comes through in upcoming journals are questions around eugenics and education. At some levels you see there are people who would see schools attempting to regulate their populations in various ways, and this would be complimentary to that.

The issues of controversy are changing all the time and that's a really good thing for the journal because different people are vulnerable to educational exclusion at different times in different circumstances so I think the journal is dynamic in that respect.

4. Who do you feel are your readership or your core audience?

Predictably, people in universities, so it's the research community and students in higher education. I think also within the school sector I do know of a lot of people who are working in schools and will refer to and use the journal, and also in education jurisdictions internationally. I'm also aware of a number of advocacy groups that consistently refer to the journal over time.

5. Do you get a feel for writing or editing a journal for a particular audience?

I've always felt that the readership has to be broad and general so you will see that papers are cast for specific segments within the readership and one of the tasks that I think I have is to try to make sure that the journal is moving around and touching the broad range and different constituencies of the readership. And the other element of that is that it's international and that has an impact when you're looking at papers and advising folk about how their writing can touch an international audience and be relevant.

6. What do you look for when considering articles and submissions?

It's perhaps a bit of a hobby horse at the moment and that is that people are writing with the reader in mind, not A reader but THE readership in mind, so they are thinking about the clarity of the work they're doing and it's accessibility, I think that's really important. Often times you find papers with great vibrancy in terms of the ideas and the conceptual base and the projects that they're reporting about, but you'll find that people have constructed this thicket of words that prevents people getting to it, so I think that's a really important thing in the writing. People are thinking about the assumptions that they make about what the reader already knows and so on. So in some cases it's important to make sure that you're describing in some detail, the methodology and approach so that there's something about the clarity of the expression and writing for the reader in that respect, something about explaining what often times seems obvious to you but isn't to others.

A third element would be in relation to thinking about, as I mentioned before, the international audience. Education is notorious for proliferating acronyms. Each country has their own sets of acronyms and they just roll off the tongue and people ought to explain that kind of thing. So those are the kinds of things that I thought of. And then a last rider on all of this is that given the journal's mandate about wanting to eliminate, dismantle, various forms of exclusion from different groups, I guess a good article has to think very carefully about the language that it adopts and how it uses language, so that there are some ways of referring to different groups of people that are offensive and people have to think about that. Having said that, immediately I think there are cultural issues around that as well that makes it complex [and difficult to manage].

So in all of that I guess the advice from where I sit would be that people writing for the journal ought to look back over the journal and think about what's been contributed and the way things have been framed for the journal. That's not to say that there's a blue print or pro-forma, it's always good to have somebody else read it before you send it off and get people to comment on expression and whether things are clear.

7. What are your aspirations for the future life of the journal? Where do you see it going?

I think there have been a number of things that have happened to the journal that weren't predicted at the outset but have been really useful to its development and to its utility. One of them has been the growth in the number of special issues, where different folk have perhaps had a symposium or a colloquium or conference around a specific set of issues, have said this is something that we think is of concern to the readers of the journal, how about doing a special issue on it? And in that way the journal has been able to provide prolonged focus around a set of issues and it's also had the general editions of the journal as well to keep the general readership going. So that's been good and it's actually helped in looking at issues that I've not been able to predict as key and central. And the other thing that it keeps moving with changing times is that exclusion is ubiquitous and it changes as the relationship between education and the world changes over time; I think that that ought to be able to be reflected in the journal.

I want to see it become increasingly more international because that was one of the aspirations at the outset, but that's always been very difficult. We tend to get a lot of Brits, Australians and North Americans writing for the journal, that's been the preponderance of contributors and indeed readers. More recently we have more Northern European readers and contributors. There have been more folk from Asia and from Africa writing for the journal as

well and that I think is a really good thing. So to promote that is important. And then there's the cross-disciplinary aspiration of the journal; that it is becoming more cross-disciplinary over time and that's something that I want to continue to promote so that it's not everyone reading the journal in the same church if you like, that it does become genuinely a forum for debate and engagement with issues.

8. When you say cross-disciplinary, what sort of subjects is it that you draw upon?

A whole range of things. A couple of issues that I've already mentioned in terms of disability for example and disability studies. There are a range of folk who, certainly in the most recent issue of the journal, who come with a disability studies perspective which is informed more by sociology and cultural studies than it is by traditional forms of special education and psychology. So for the journal it's really important to get that kind of voice there but it's equally important to have psychologists contributing to the journal and talking about the way in which their discipline is changing over time as well. That's one area, there are other areas in terms of different disciplines interested in the development and impacts of assessments for example, as I mentioned before. There you might have the psycho-metricians wanting to talk about the construction of assessment tools for different population groups. They are a whole range of areas that you might draw different disciplines to, and the journal has been doing that, it's been really moving that way. People across sectors, across disciplinary areas, we've had people in cultural studies doing interesting things. I remember Paul Dash's paper on students and black hairstyles and so on, and looking at popular culture in relation to that. That's been one example of a different form of expression.

9. Where did the term 'inclusive education' come from and how has its meaning changed over the years?

The quick answer to that is, it depends whom you ask as to where it formed and who was responsible for that. For my part, I genuinely hadn't read or heard of the term prior to, I was actually on vacation with my family in London and we were staying in a hotel just around the corner from John Street and I just said to my family I want to go to Taylor & Francis and see if there's somebody there who'll talk to me about an idea for a journal. And I had just been thinking about this notion of trying to bring together the different constituencies who were experiencing different forms of exclusion from education and providing a single platform for folk to talk to each other because I thought that there were lessons to be had, each from the other. And that's basically how I described it to Richard and used the term. It's looking at how you become more inclusive and we talked about inclusive education from that. As I read more now and with the popularity of the area and the proliferation of literature around it, people have been searching for its antecedents and so on. So you'll read accounts where people will talk about people in Canada and Gordon Porter and folk in advocacy groups, they're responsible for founding it. Others will say it found its origins in feminist research. So I'm not sure from where the tablets were delivered or discovered in that respect.

How has its meaning changed over time? I think part of the problem with it is it's been such a generic descriptor that people have tended not to stipulate what they mean, and in that way it has brought together a number of folk who will describe themselves as practitioners of or researchers in or advocates for inclusive education, and they might be talking about very different things. I will go to a conference where folk whom I would describe as more traditional special educators, are talking about forms of education that I would have some

difficulty with in terms of the way in which they group particular kids and particular identities and so on, outside of the mainstream education provision, but they will talk about that as a form of exclusion as provided education that otherwise wasn't provided. So I think part of the difficulty of it is, that over time it's picked up such a broad audience that it has come to mean everything and nothing, and that's part of our challenge for the journal, is to give it some sense of meaning and force. I've tended to be thinking more recently that inclusion will mean more when we're thinking about questions not so much of refining the definition of it but thinking about the inclusion in to what, those kinds of questions or thinking more about what is the nature of exclusion and how do we meet the challenge of that. By doing that I think inclusion will take a clearer form.

10. How far would you agree with the point that educational psychology and special education can have a negative impact on disabled pupils?

I think I have to build in some caveats around it and exercise a little caution. The simple answer is yes, I do agree that some of the thinking and practices around educational psychology and special education have had negative or deleterious impacts on kids who are seen as disabled, that they've led to a labelling of children, they've reduced people's expectations for what they can achieve, and there's all of that. But then that problem is not simply reserved for psychologists and special educators, I think in regular schools and regular education generally, there are all kinds of practices and thinking that have had profoundly negative impacts on disabled children. So I'm not sure that the greatest benefit will be drawn from protracting the argument between special and regular education because I think they were both invented yesterday to do things for another time, and that it might be more productive to think about what kinds of knowledge and dispositions and practices and resources are needed to work in new times. I think we will get further from that than simply drawing the lines between educational psychology and sociology and special and regular education. I think that's a debate we ought to move beyond. In the *British [Journal of] Sociology of Education* there was an article published, I think it was 1991 or 1992 by John Furlong, on disaffected pupils and at that time he was calling for a reduction of two forms of occupational blindness. He drew that notion from Raewyn Connell's book on **Gender and Power**, where she was talking about the blindnesses first of psychologists who weren't showing an ability to understand power and context of students and then sociologists who were refusing to research deeply enough into the individual psyche of students. Furlong was wanting to bring those together. I think in some ways that's the challenge now, to move beyond the negative impacts that things have had, to look at what's required now rather than re-litigate those debates.

11. Is segregated special education a means of controlling difference?

Segregation I think is a really easy concept to understand and also a difficult one, simultaneously. At its heart, the test of segregation is who gets to make the decision for whom. If it's always a question of segregation really is a reflection of professional predispositions, of where people want to place people who they see as different or in need of their services or whatever, then the problems build. The history of special education is also complex because at one level it can be well argued that it was a radical force for the provision for schooling of some kids who didn't have access to schools at all, and in that respect who can condemn it? Simultaneously, segregated schooling fitted into the needs and wishes of people who were eugenicists and wanted separate schooling for a particular group of kids, so there is always that complex mix of different forces that are in operation. I think that

increasingly what we find is that one form of school is inadequate for a whole range of kids; those that we might call disabled and those who are coming to be known as disabled, simply because schools aren't fit for purpose anymore. So kids who used to be rejected by schools and would find a place in the unskilled labour market can't go there anymore so they're turning up at schools; schools don't deal with them so they are starting to find a whole range of different attention disorders and seeking to deal with them in separate ways because of that. So if you have people segregated to construct one group of deserving kids and another group that we will deal with to keep them out of the road of the others, that I think is really problematic. If students and parents are taken out of processes of decision making about where they get their education, that too is really problematic, so there is controversy.

12. Do you agree with Barton (1987) that 'special educational needs' is an institutional sleight of hand, a euphemism for the failure of schools?

I've used that statement from Len Barton a lot of times because a lot of kids have been swept up in descriptions and categories of special educational needs and you will see that it's a shifting population over time. Whether it shifts as a reflection of the nature of kids or as a reflection of different social forces and different social movements and change in circumstances of schooling is a real question. We know that kids who are described as having special educational needs in one school, in another context, in another school, may do very, very well. So what does that do to our notion of where need lies? Do kids have attention disorders or are they subject to poor pedagogy, boring curriculum, a schooling that they know is not going to lead them anywhere of value and worth? They become disconnected, disengaged and disruptive. In that respect it's a problematic concept and often times it's much more convenient to designate the problem as the student, than to draw in the broader questions of the effectiveness of the school and the pedagogical and curriculum choices that they make. And the other aspect of that is why over time do we see a preponderance of different populations attracting particular descriptors so that you'll see that the disproportionate referral of say African-American children in the US to categories of special educational need; is that their pathology or is it something else that's happening? And that's where I think it become euphemistic and in this country we might talk about issues around the education of Caribbean kids in school and their disproportionate referral with special educational needs to pupil referral units. Aboriginal kids, Maori kids, you see those trends around where they seem to have more special educational needs than others. So why is that? And that's where I think we can test whether it's a euphemism, whether it has more administrative importance and convenience than it has of value as a descriptor of somebody.

13. In your article *It's a fit up! Inclusive education, higher education, policy and the discordant voice* you argue that, "Despite the analytic power and the political intent of Inclusive Education as a counterpoint to special education, its appropriation is imminent if not complete." How imminent do you think Inclusive Education might be?

I was reading a book by Daniel Levitin; a follow up book on **Your Brain and Music**, and there's a new book out, **The World in Six Songs**, and he uses this lovely phrase from another musicologist to talk about the antiquity and ubiquity of music. I think exclusion is like that; it has a very, very long history and it's very, very pervasive, and its history will continue. I think that different forms of exclusion to different groups of people will happen over time as a reflection of different social movements, and global movements. To that extent I think there will always be a need for research into how these exclusions happen and the inclusive

question is, what are we going to do about it given that we know that? The thing about special education and inclusive education was really me trying to be provocative because of my levels of exasperation that inclusive education has become so popular in policy circles and has been adopted right across research communities. You see enormous effort going into this thing called inclusive education but often times it's people using a new vocabulary to explain what they've always done and I think we have to be vigilant about that and show that up. Saying that, it's not just special education that that applies to, that applies to us all. We need to think about the ways in which we become part of problems as issues change over time.

14. You have said that “the popularizing of inclusive education represented a ‘shedding of its insurrectionary force’”. Can you explain what you mean by this?

I can explain that, it's Edward Said, he's got a collection of essays and the question was that 'the popularizing of inclusive education represented a shedding of its insurrectionary force'. In that book of essays there's an essay called 'Travelling theory revisited' and he looks at the way in which an idea that has a particular historical moment when it becomes popular and is applied to different circumstances, it tends to lose that initial radical urge. So for inclusive education I think its really radical time was when you had people like Len Barton and Mike Oliver and Sally Tomlinson and others talking about issues to do with disablement and education disability and education, and were providing at that time, a very fresh and new critique of special education through a sociological lens. That really, at that time, was a radical force and had greater insurrectionary power, a way of upsetting the apple cart if you like or the way that things are. As things become more popular, as Edward Said says, they become tamed and domesticated, so that when education ministries around the globe say that they are about inclusive education and pick it up, and write it into policy and practice, it tends to become more of the order of a blancmange, it's less radical and is simply absorbed into the texture of how things are done.