



Including students as co-enquirers: Matters of identity, agency, language and labelling in an International participatory research study



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ABSTRACT

This paper takes the reader through the methodological development of an international study, which involved 8 academics and 373 students in Departments of Education from 6 universities in Europe, New Zealand and the USA. It explores the uses, benefits and critical tensions within participatory research methodology when used in a study addressing questions of undergraduate student diversity and inclusion. Issues when linking the views and interests of the various project parties, a core element of participatory research, are considered. Alongside this is a discussion on how this led to shifts in participant role identities, a reconfiguration of research ownership and insights into the complexities of participants' education. The work addresses a niche area in terms of participants as co-researchers, in particular matters of identity, agency, language and labelling, thus adding to developments in this field.

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1. Introduction

This article reports on an international study that was funded by the UK's Higher Education Academy, a national body which was created to support and research teaching excellence in Higher Education (HE). The study aimed to gain critical insight into the discourse of diversity and inclusion in higher education. In particular, it sought to locate where these terms exist, reflect on questions of their legitimacy, and gain an understanding of the education experiences of students positioned by their institution as 'diverse', these students were essential to the study. The study was conducted over a ten-month period November 2013 – August 2014 and took place in 6 universities: 2 in the USA (urban Los Angeles, California, and rural central New Hampshire), 3 in Europe (2 in the UK and 1 in Cyprus), and 1 in New Zealand (NZ).² A total of 8 academics and 373 students were involved in the work. Each university has a significant number of undergraduate students studying Education

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² For reasons of anonymity we will not refer to the universities by name when illustrating our points with reference to focus group/questionnaire responses. Thus, we will now refer to the participating universities as university A, B, C, D and E.

in either initial teacher education or Arts based programmes. Individual programme numbers across the 6 universities varied from 400 to 700. Whilst there was variation in terms of curriculum and programme structure, each of the 8 academics taught within a similar field, broadly speaking that of inclusive education and 'diversity', which constituted a core element of all programmes. In terms of the academic links, we know one another through international research and publications along with visits and established friendships.

The paper begins with the study context as linked to international policy development and the discourse of Inclusive Education, its purposes and complexities, alongside a reflection on the need for on-going research to prepare graduates of education for their work in an increasingly challenging world. Next, discussion is provided on the study's methodology participatory research, its purpose, rationale and how its ethos, along with the 8 academics' political positions, linked to core elements of the research: matters of identity, agency, language and labelling. The work's contribution to the field is through connection to [Nind's \(2011\)](#) view that 'participants as co-researchers' is a noteworthy subject due to its absence in participatory research (PR) literature and to [Welikala and Atkin's \(2014\)](#) stance that collaborative research creates alternative and contrasting views on student experience. The work's originality is found by its taking the reader through the study's methodological development, mapping and exploring the shifts and changes. Final reflections held by participants suggest using PR and understanding its potential as a political agent, enabled them to grasp the significance of their role as co-researchers. The work concludes with some final questions and reflections on participatory research, a methodology which was initially experienced as ambiguous but became clear in changes made via engagement with our participants. It can be argued that PR's general rationale not only allows for methodological changes, but also promotes such manoeuvring through the dialectical exchange of all project stakeholders who, in terms of this methodology, are ideally positioned as equals in terms of roles, participation and power. Whilst we do not maintain that our participants, students and academics, worked as equals we would argue this core aspect of PR challenged us profoundly, causing much reflection and supporting connections to each other.

2. Study context

Contemporary international higher education policy emphasises more equitable access to university for underrepresented student groups ([Quinn, 2013](#); [Allen, Storan and Thomas, 2005](#); [HEFCE, 2014](#)). This is known in the UK as Widening Participation (WP) ([HEFCE, 2014](#)) and its equivalent exists in the other countries where this study took place, for example:

- USA – [U.S. Department of Education \(2012\)](#), [OECD \(2010–2012\)](#), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Civil Rights Law) Accommodations and Americans with Disabilities Act access requirements.
- New Zealand – Tertiary Education Strategy (2014–2019); Disability Strategy (2001).
- Cyprus – [Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture \(2010\)](#).

The impact of the wider access discourse can be seen with the growth of level 6 courses in Further and Higher Education (FHE) colleges, increased numbers of mature, part-time students, students with disabilities, and students from challenging socio-economic backgrounds, as well as the recent increase in awarding university status to HE colleges in the UK and Cyprus ([Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012](#); [Gale & Hodge, 2014](#); [Independent Commission on Fees, 2014](#)). We can also see the impact in New Zealand with the government's commitment to increasing numbers of Maori and Pasifika students in higher education, and in similar ways in the USA as noted in related references above.

Each of the study's institutions market themselves as vanguards for 'diversity' and providers of inclusive education which, as a concept in terms of meaning and purpose, is widely debated ([Ahmed, 2012](#)). We, the eight academics, position ourselves as self-reflexive pedagogues who regularly question our teaching approaches and their impact in terms of our cultural mediation within and across the Academy ([Trahar, 2011](#)).

As practitioner researchers we reflect regularly on our pedagogy and our position in terms of political views, values and identities. We also aspire to further develop our own and our institutions' cultural capabilities, meaning: *the ability to understand different values and systems and to challenge one's own thinking and behaviour about them* ([Trahar, 2011, p. 47](#)). Discourse regarding cultural capabilities, assertions as to its place and purpose in HE, are connected with other discourses such as 'internationalisation', 'globalisation' and/or 'inclusion and diversity'. In terms of the latter, 'inclusion and diversity', the central purpose, as understood in policy and disseminated in much related institution provision and promotion, is that of social justice and equal rights. However, there are counter arguments. Certain sources argue recent mass expansion in HE is linked to a dominant neoliberal logic as opposed to that of social justice, thus widening access for equality becomes an imaginary, sweet coating for the bitter pill of profit and product expansion ([Gale & Hodge, 2014](#); [Watson, 2013](#)).

Linked to this, international figures reveal high dropout rates and failure amongst 'diverse' students ([Madriaga, Hanson, Kay and Walker, 2011](#); [Quinn, 2013](#)). Research also suggests a continuing lack of engagement at policy and practice levels with 'diverse' students, ignoring their potential as key stakeholders contributing to discussions on necessary changes to practice ([Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012](#)). Alongside this runs the language debate, the use and misuse of the label 'diverse' and the political positioning of students on either side of this binary, ([Gibson et al., 2016](#); [Kimura, 2014](#)). It was through a process of reflection, questioning and dialogue – both solitary and collaboratively – that we 8 colleagues decided upon a study to explore what 'diversity' is, how it becomes manifest and where it is located in terms of student identity, institution position, response and subsequent student experience. This article will not provide a detailed exploration of our study's findings, they

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