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**Inclusive and Supportive Education Congress  
International Special Education Conference  
Inclusion: Celebrating Diversity?**

1st - 4th August 2005. Glasgow, Scotland

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**Using visual images to make sense of inclusive education:  
an interactive symposium based on experiences in five countries**

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Since the late 1980s a growing number of international scholars have argued that progress towards more inclusive education systems requires a move away from practices based on the traditional perspectives of special education, towards approaches that focus on developing effective schools for all (Ainscow, 1999; Skrtic, 1991). This shift in thinking has been characterised as the 'organisational paradigm' (Dyson and Millward, 2000). In general terms it involves moves away from explanations of educational failure that concentrate on the characteristics of individual children and their families, towards an analysis of the barriers to participation and learning experienced by students within school systems (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). In this way, those students who do not respond to existing arrangements come to be regarded as 'hidden voices' who, under certain conditions, can encourage the improvement of schools.

During this symposium we explore some of the practical implications of adopting such a perspective. Specifically, we describe and reflect on the experience of using photographs as a research strategy that might help to move thinking and practice forward. Using sets of pictures from different countries, the symposium sets out to engage participants in a process of analysis and discussion that can be used to explore understandings of power relationships and challenge historical truths about schooling.

**Rethinking special needs**

The field that has been known as special education or, more recently, special needs education, is involved in a period of considerable uncertainty. In particular, the emphasis on inclusive education that is now evident in many countries challenges special needs practitioners to reconsider their own thinking and practice. This context of uncertainty provides the special education field with new opportunities for continuing its historical purpose of addressing the needs of those learners who become marginalised within existing educational arrangements.

In some countries, inclusive education is thought of as an approach to serving children with disabilities within general education settings (Mittler, 2000). Internationally, however, it is increasingly seen more broadly as a reform that responds to diversity amongst all learners (UNESCO, 2001). The arguments explored during this symposium are based on this broader formulation. They presume that the aim of inclusive school development is to eliminate exclusionary processes from education that are a consequence of attitudes and responses to diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability (Vitello & Mithaug, 1998). As such, it starts from the belief that education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just society.

Recent research suggests that inclusive school development has to be seen as a social process (Ainscow, Howes, Farrell & Frankham, 2003). It requires those within a particular context to engage with different views of a school's policies, practices and cultures. More specifically, it involves the collection of different forms of evidence in order to analyse barriers to participation and learning (Ainscow, 2005; Booth and Ainscow, 2002). Engaging with evidence can help to create space for reappraisal and rethinking by interrupting existing discourses, and by focusing attention on overlooked possibilities for moving practice forward.

A particularly powerful technique in this respect involves the gathering and consideration of 'evidence' collected by students about physical and socio-cultural aspects of their school. Such 'evidence' can, we have found, provide *interruptions* that can help to 'make the familiar unfamiliar' in ways that stimulate the self-questioning, creativity and action that seem to be necessary for moving a school in an inclusive direction. However, the introduction of such approaches is far from straightforward, as we will illustrate in the accounts that we present during the symposium. Briefly these are as follows:

**The accounts**

**1. Queensland, Australia:** For many years researchers and practitioners in education settings have attempted through processes of educational reform and inclusive school development to break down the industrial age assumptions about schools, learning, and teacher-student relationships. This project involved Australian

secondary school students working as participatory researchers in collaboration with a researcher, teachers and parents. Research methodology using visual narrative techniques provided the students with a conceptual lens to view their school community: The examples of visual narrative shared in this presentation, depict problems, contradictions of exclusion and celebrations of inclusion in the lived world of the students. Photographs combined with stories represent students' views of their social, cultural and political environment. This project illustrates how the insights of students can help break down assumptions, values and meanings that block progress to achieving more socially just schools

**2. Hong Kong:** The Hong Kong government currently has a strong focus on developing inclusive schools while continuing to oversee the implementation of education reform. The move towards inclusion has been embedded within a school change paradigm that is focused on the development of schools to ensure the learning and participation of all students. A key aspect of this transformation is concerned with changing attitudes, beliefs, behaviour and actions within schools to improve educational attainments by developing a supportive school ethos for staff and students. A whole school approach to integrated education is employed. To support this movement a number of initiatives have been implemented. Following the 'White Paper on Rehabilitation – Equal Opportunities and Full Participation' (May 1995), the government undertook a two-year pilot project from 1997 to 1999 aimed at identifying how students could be integrated effectively into mainstream schools. Schools were encouraged to adopt a whole school approach to integration. The final outcome was the continued promotion of a whole-school approach to integration. In 2004/5 this program is offered to students with mild grade intellectual disability, hearing or visual impairment, physical disability or ASD (with average intelligence). In this academic year 117 schools are adopting this approach including 80 primary and 37 secondary schools. The visuals presented are from one school in Hong Kong in a low socio-economic area. They represent the student's perceptions of the practices within the school that are reflective of what they deem to be 'inclusive' and those they consider to be 'exclusive'.

**3. Zambia:** In September 2004 a Research and Development Worker from the Enabling Education Network went to Mpika, in the north of Zambia, to work alongside teachers, parents and children from four schools as they used images as part of their ongoing development of more inclusive practices. Two main activities were used: photography and mapping. Drama, photo elicitation and individual drawing activities were also used in two of the schools. Groups were given digital cameras and the children were asked to work co-operatively in their groups to take photos in the school environment of 'welcoming/unwelcoming places'. This instruction was simplified (through translation) to 'places they liked and disliked'. Once the photos had been printed the children made posters using the photos to tell their stories. Other groups were asked to look around the school environment to identify places they liked and disliked, but instead they drew maps to illustrate this. Some groups analysed and discussed photographs of other schools, comparing and contrasting with their experiences of their own school. Further groups created role plays depicting something that happens which makes them happy or unhappy to come to school. Finally individual drawing was used with children who finished their main activity early, and again took the theme 'things I do or that happen to me which make me happy/unhappy to be at school. All of these activities encouraged children to take an active role in considering their school and school environment. Interestingly, the activities and the corresponding work produced by the children challenged the beliefs of some teachers that students' perspectives of their school experience were simplistic, unperceptive, or of little value. The photo activities enabled some students to express themselves and address particular problems and issues using photographs as 'evidence', but also stimulated deeper consideration and discussion, which delved 'beneath the surface' of the actual photographs and what they literally represent.

**4. South African:** This case study focuses on an image-based approach to children's understanding of inclusivity and exclusivity in their own school context in a rural region of the greater Stellenbosch area. The school, which is situated in a small rural town with a close-knit community, is still battling with the aftermath of the apartheid system due to previous inequalities and discrimination in the provision of resources. People from the "outside" are not easily accepted and the community in town jealously looks after its own. Many of the children in the school come from neighbouring farms where their parents work as farm labourers with poverty and adult illiteracy as major problems. Although most families come from a lower middle-class background, a few parents also hold good jobs in the town itself and some earn a good middle-class salary. The photos, taken by the children and a researcher and then discussed in detail afterwards with the children, illustrate inclusion and exclusion, best and worse places to be, comfortable and uncomfortable situations and where they feel welcome and unwelcome. In an analysis of the discussion by the children of their selection of photos and what they mean to them, a number of key barriers to learning and development emerged as major themes.

**5. Victoria, Australia:** One of the foremost concerns every teacher faces on a daily basis is the issue of responding to diversity, culturally and individually. The issue of non-participation in schooling is a key focus of recent curriculum reform initiatives across Australia. In recent years when attempting to respond to some of these dilemmas, educational researchers have looked to the broader field of the social sciences for research methodologies that enact more democratic ways of working with research participants. In freeing the 'voice' and 'place' of our research participants the need for researchers to make their methodological positions explicit, the partiality of their accounts and the politics of 'insider' research is well recognized. In recent years there have been increased opportunities for teacher/researchers to explore a range of methods that broadly fall under the qualitative, ethnographic Arts-based approaches. One of the possibilities is visual narrative through 'image based research' (Prosser 1997). Through images produced and finger printed by secondary students some innovative possibilities for understanding diversity and supporting new relationships with our research participants are opened out. Professional knowledge that will sustain curriculum reform efforts requires teachers who can inquire into the emergent theories of practice. This paper explores some of the issues of the visual theoretically, particularly in respect to the ongoing aspirations of the field of inclusive education in the

context of curriculum reform and renewal in Australia. We conclude by reminding us that our work is not without innocence and embodies issues of validity and identity simultaneously. The students who were included in this study attend one of three different secondary schools in regional and suburban areas of Melbourne, a large city in the Australian state of Victoria. Each school has a distinct culture and demographic and was initially selected by the researchers as the schools were known or were actively engaged with curriculum reform that centres difference and a supportive and inclusive culture. We asked students to volunteer to take digital photos. A total of 30 students (5 pairs at each school) took part in the study, aged between 14-16 years of age. We visited the schools during ordinary school activities.

**6. England:** Moving schools in an inclusive direction is particularly difficult in countries such as England, where policies for 'raising standards' have tended to reduce the flexibility for responding to student diversity. The study carried out in an English school attempted to explore what this means in practice. Bearing this in mind, we collaborated with a small group of sixteen year old students to record their views of five years in the school, using what we call a photovoice approach. We hoped that their perspectives would give us deeper insights into what had happened in the school. We also intended that their views could be used to stimulate further developments amongst members of staff. Working in pairs the students took photographs around the school of areas they saw as welcoming and supportive, and areas that were less so. The pairs then produced posters based on their photographs. As they worked we recorded their conversations and probed them further about their experiences and opinions. The students made many positive comments about the school and its inclusiveness, confirming the impressions we had gained from staff. They also explained that the school had a good reputation in the local community. However, they highlighted several things they felt made the school a 'less welcoming' place. For example, students pointed out some inconsistencies in the school's application of its rules. There was, they argued, a sense that the best and worst students were exempt from certain rules, leaving those in the middle, sometimes feeling unfairly penalized.

### Reflections

The perspectives of students (like the perspectives of any other members of a school community) need to be understood beyond literal interpretations, to be engaged with and discussed. During one of the projects a student explained what it meant for him to be consulted: 'It's been different. It's been better than lessons. I think personally it's been a lot different for me. I've enjoyed it really. It's made me feel more involved, being asked what things you prefer about the school and why you prefer it, and what you don't like and why you don't like it...it's really made me think about how it can be changed and things like that.' Another student commented: 'Normally, when you say something, you get people turning it around in your head...with this you've been able to do your own thing instead of someone else's.'

It seems, then, that the views of students can be a powerful lever for change. However, the use of such approaches is likely to be very challenging. Their successful use seems to depend on relationships between students and adults that encourage an open exchange of ideas. This requires forms of leadership that foster a willingness to address the challenges that emerge as a result of listening to the voices of different people.

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