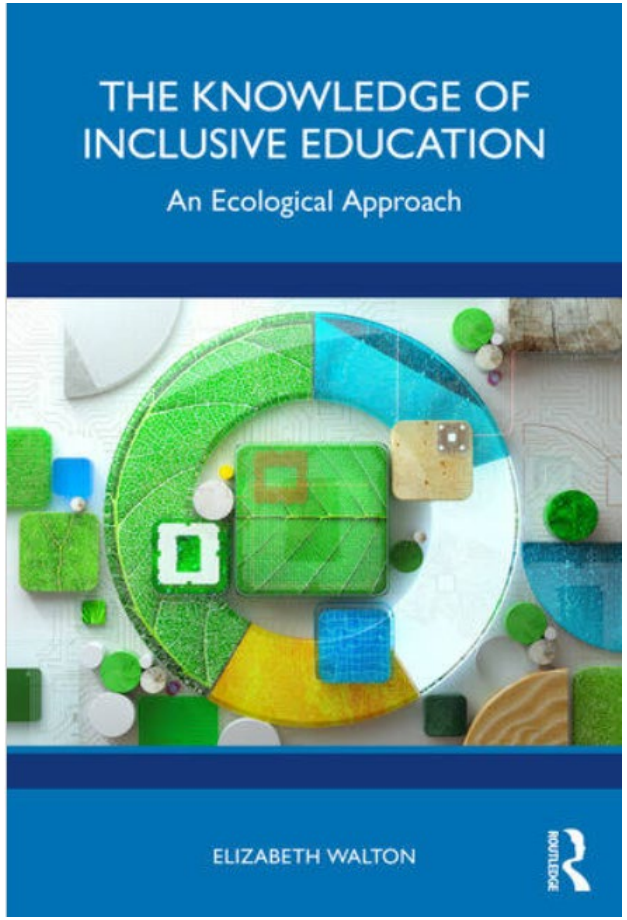
NCSE Annual Research Conference 2026
WEDNESDAY 4 NOVEMBER 2026



An ecology of knowledges for inclusion and belonging: Beyond hierarchies and silos

Dr. Elizabeth Walton
Professor of Education
University of Nottingham

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The problem of knowledge in inclusive education

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Competing silos of expert knowledge

Teacher knowledge

University knowledge

SEN-specialist knowledge

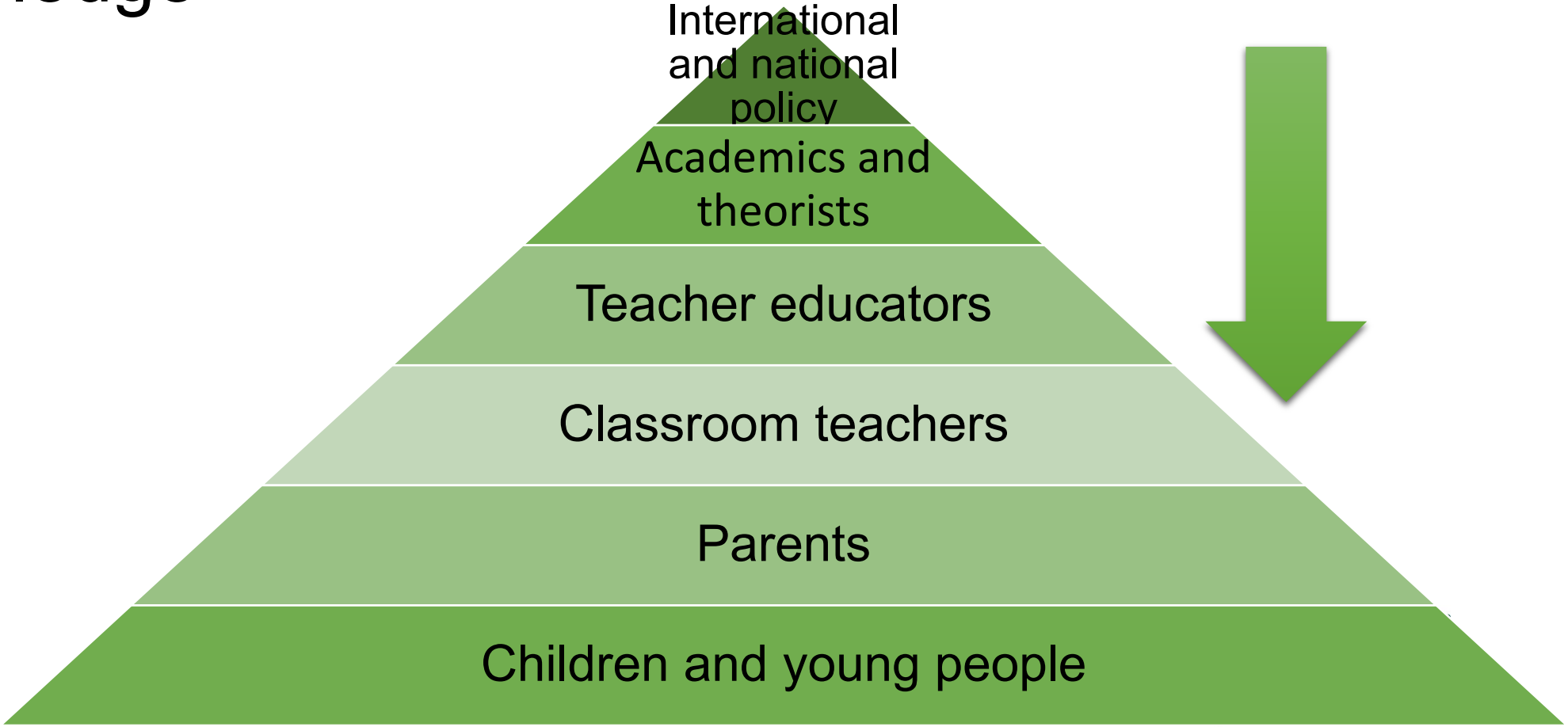
Policy knowledge



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Hierarchies of knowledge

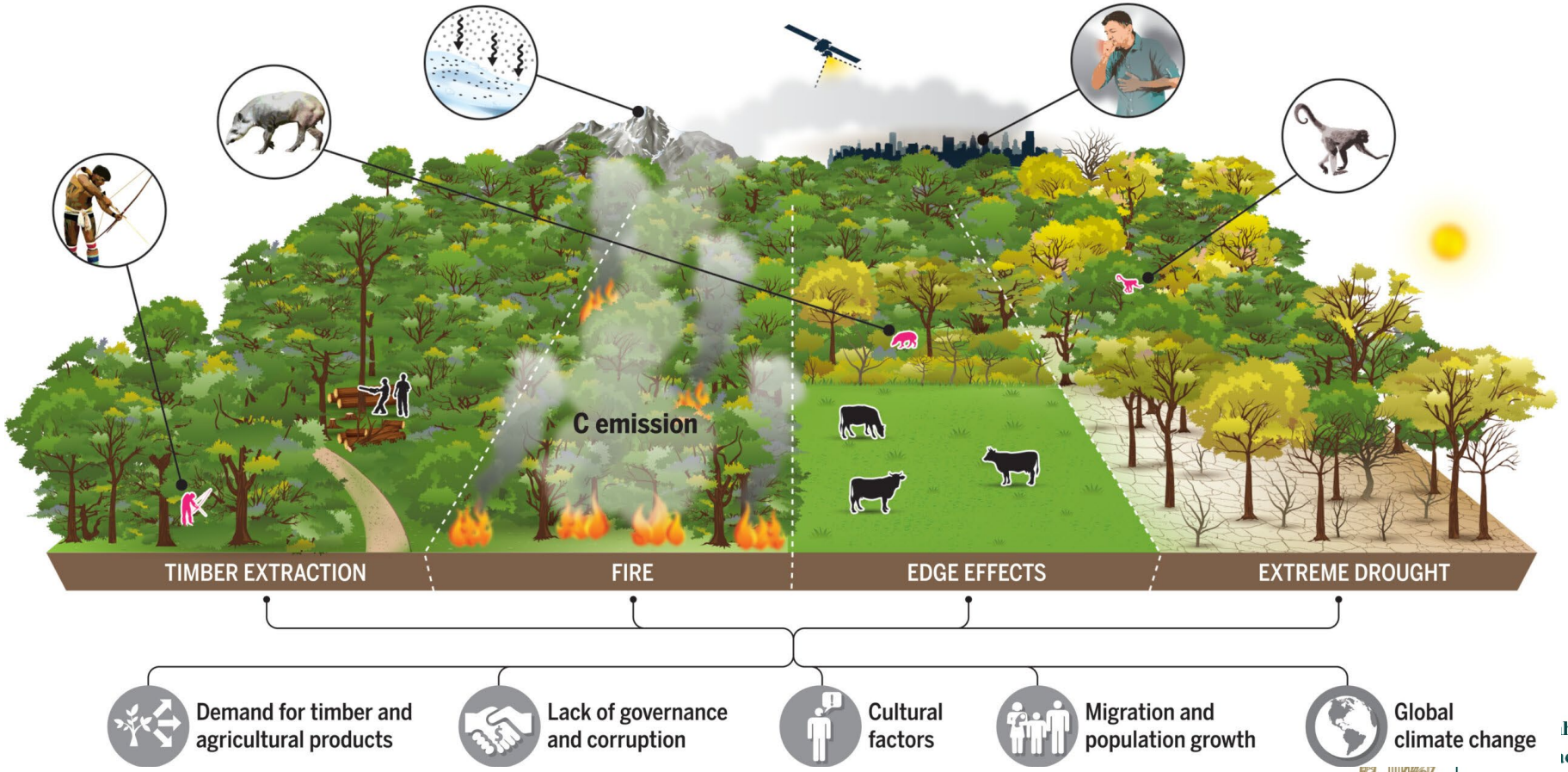
The ideal of inclusive education



Alternative ways of thinking: Ecologies of knowledges

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Thinking ecologically



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Ecologies of knowledges

- Disrupt hierarchies
- Embrace diversity
- Recognise interconnectedness and interdependence
- Negotiate differences
- Characterised by multi-linearity, complexity and open-endedness
- Entangled with place
- Have competing elements
- Are dynamic

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Who knows what about inclusion and belonging?

1. Teacher educators
2. Teachers
3. Parents
4. Children and young people
5. Research, researchers, and theorists
6. Policy and policy-makers

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1. Teacher educators

- Interviews with 9 Teacher educators from: UK, Australia, South Africa, Uganda
- Three gazes (Maton, 2014) on inclusive education

Born gaze
Personal experience

Cultivated gaze
Professional experience and learning

Trained gaze
Academic study

Maton, K. (2014). *Knowledge and knowers*. Routledge

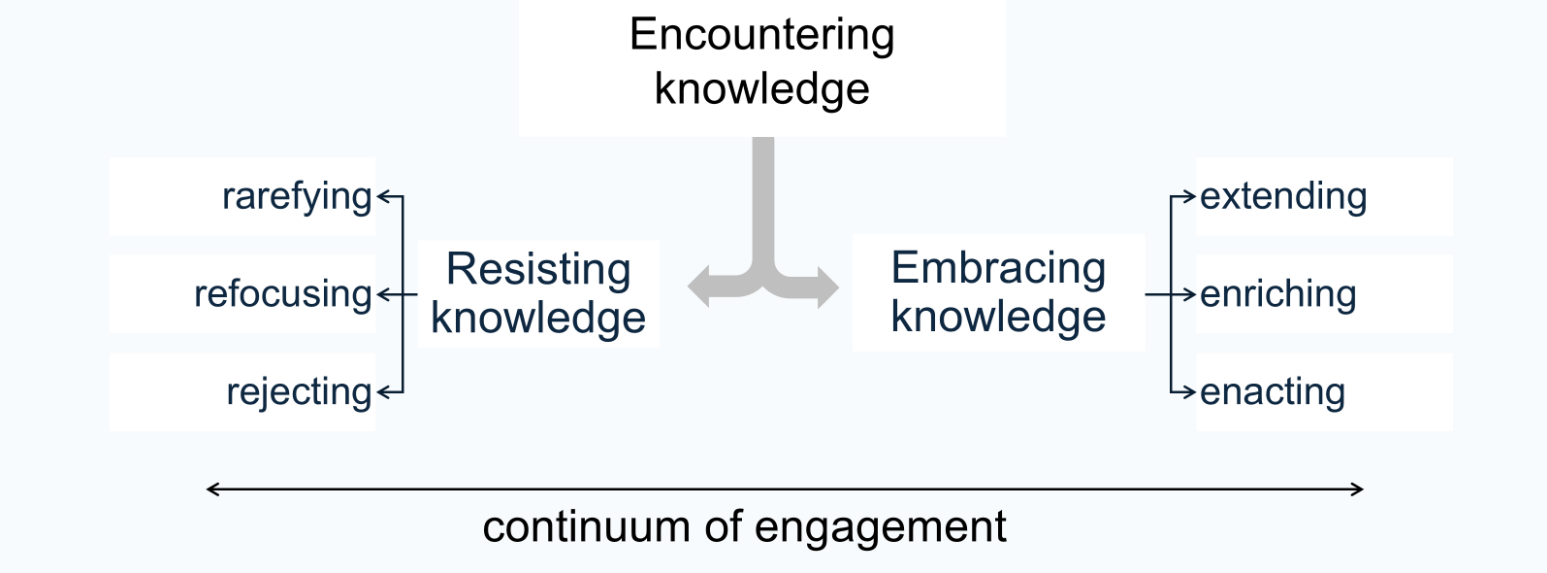
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Contributions to knowledge about inclusion and belonging

- Research inclusive education
- Shape approaches to inclusion though curriculum
- Boundary knowledge
- Focus on practice **but** often seen as lacking appreciation of classroom conditions

2. Teachers

- Recorded professional learning community meetings over three years in a school in South Africa
- Guided conversations to enable inclusive practice



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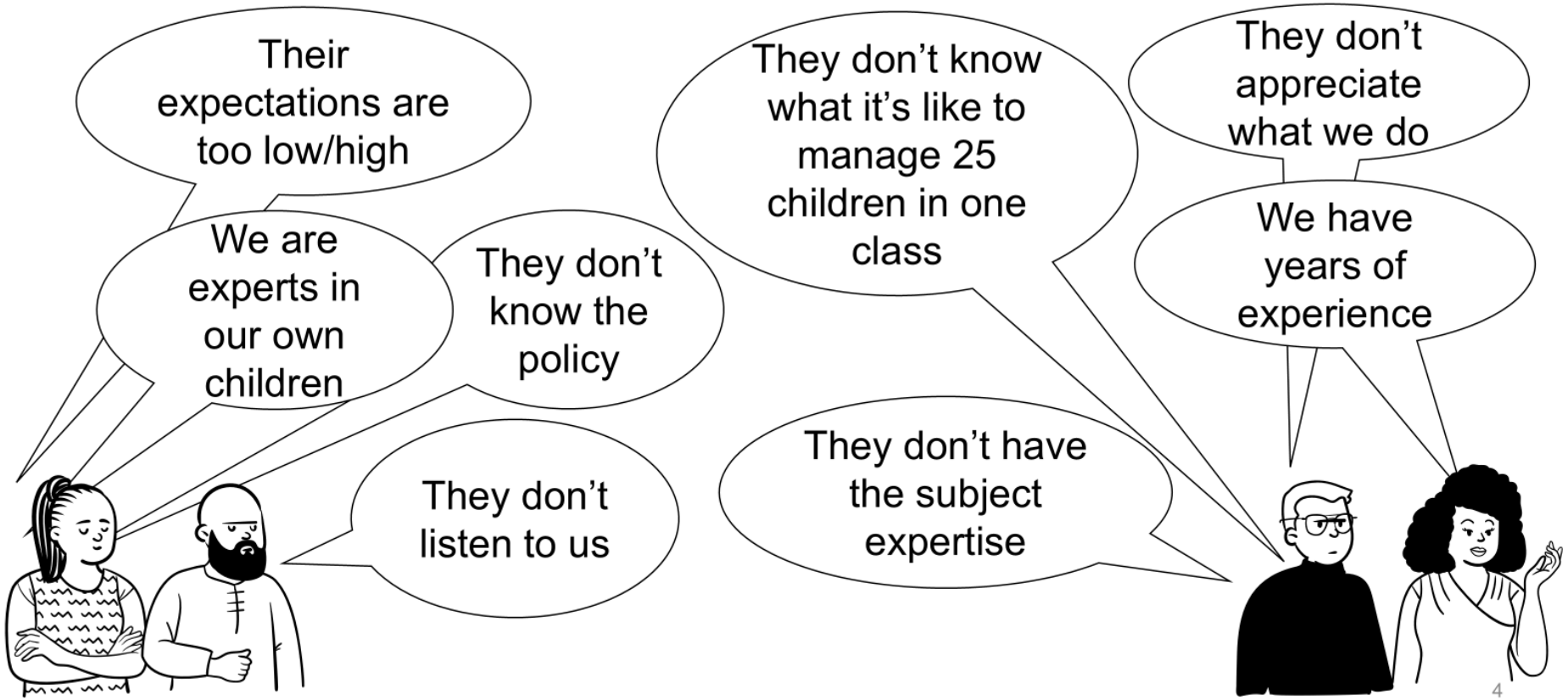
Contributions to knowledge about inclusion and belonging

- Teachers as epistemic bricoleurs
- Collaboration and knowledge sharing
- Important role of context shaping inclusion
- Strong sense of epistemic agency, **but** misconceptions can be persistent

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3. Parents

- Interviews with 10 parents of disabled children from UK and Australia who want their children in mainstream



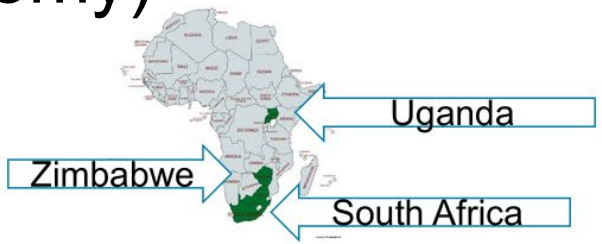
Contributions to knowledge about inclusion and belonging

- Inclusion is important for everyone
- Experts in their own children, and knowledge of policy, research and the value of advocacy
- Have a life-wide understanding of inclusion and belonging
- Seek productive partnerships **but** families may have competing agendas

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4. Children and young people

- Interviews with +/- 50 disabled young refugees in South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe (The DRIVE Project, funded by The British Academy)









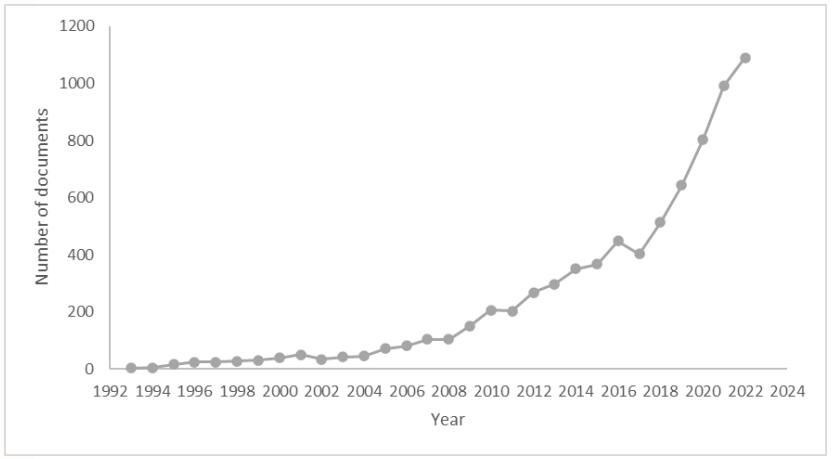
Contributions to knowledge about inclusion and belonging

- Intersectional oppression shapes experience
- Insider perspectives offer unique insight
- Children and young people have hopes and dreams
- Transformative potential **but** voices can offer contingent, idiosyncratic, and segmented knowledge

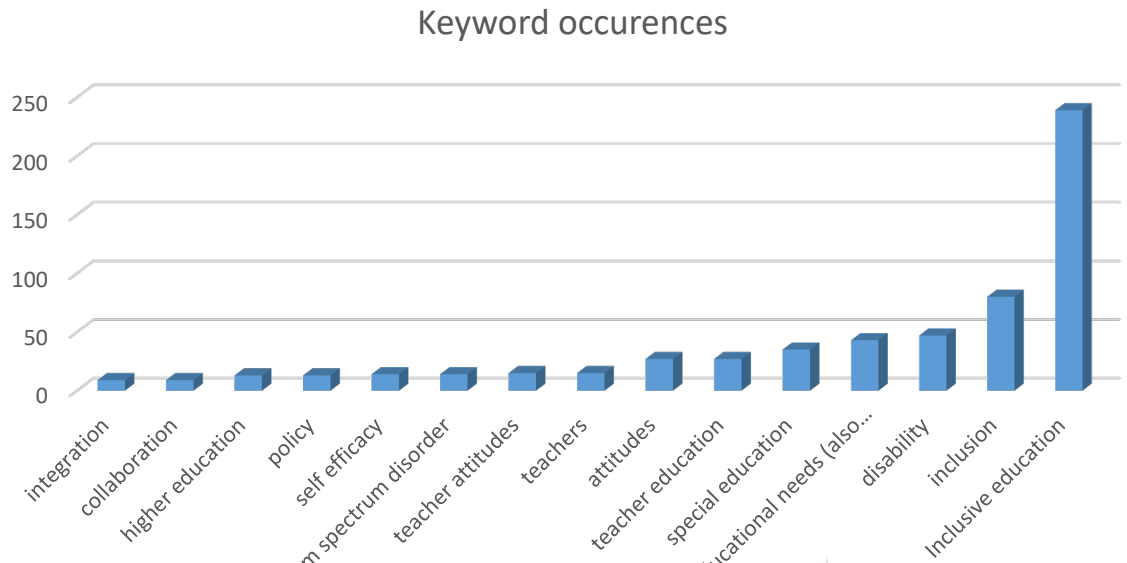
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5. Research, researchers, and theorists

- Bibliometric analysis of 7,454 articles, chapters on “inclusive education” from Scopus 1993 – 2022.



Growth in “inclusive education” publications 1993 – 2022. Graphic generated by Scopus.



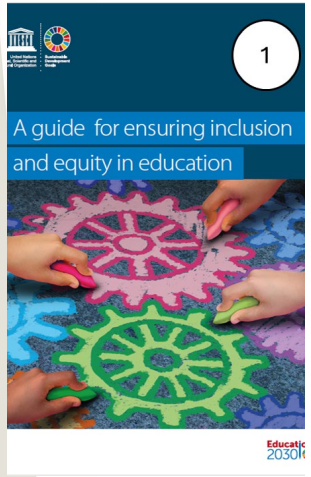
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Contributions to knowledge about inclusion and belonging

- Evidence for practices
- Theories and concepts that enable us to think the ‘not yet thought’
- Advance the political agenda of inclusive education
- Shape the field (positively or negatively)

6. Policy and policy-makers

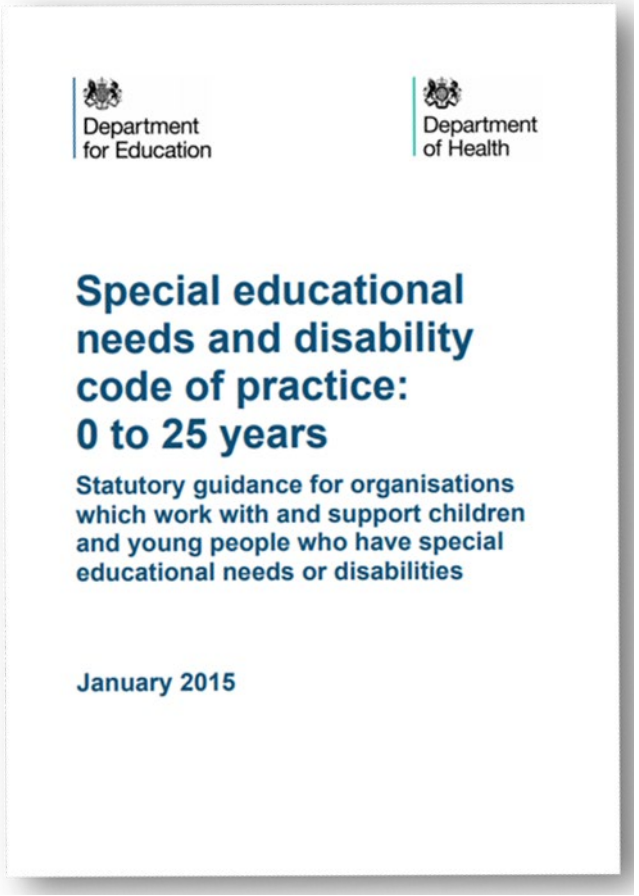
- Close reading of 4 international guideline documents and UK and South African policies

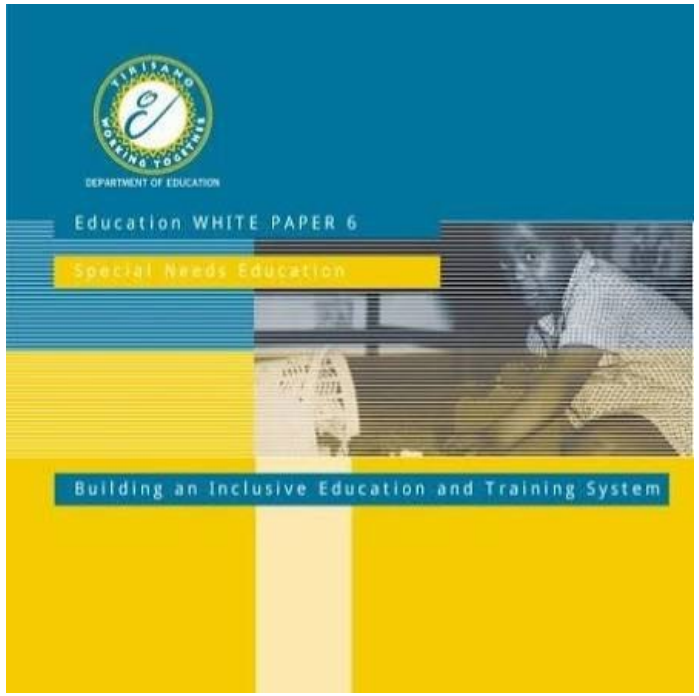












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Contributions to knowledge about inclusion and belonging

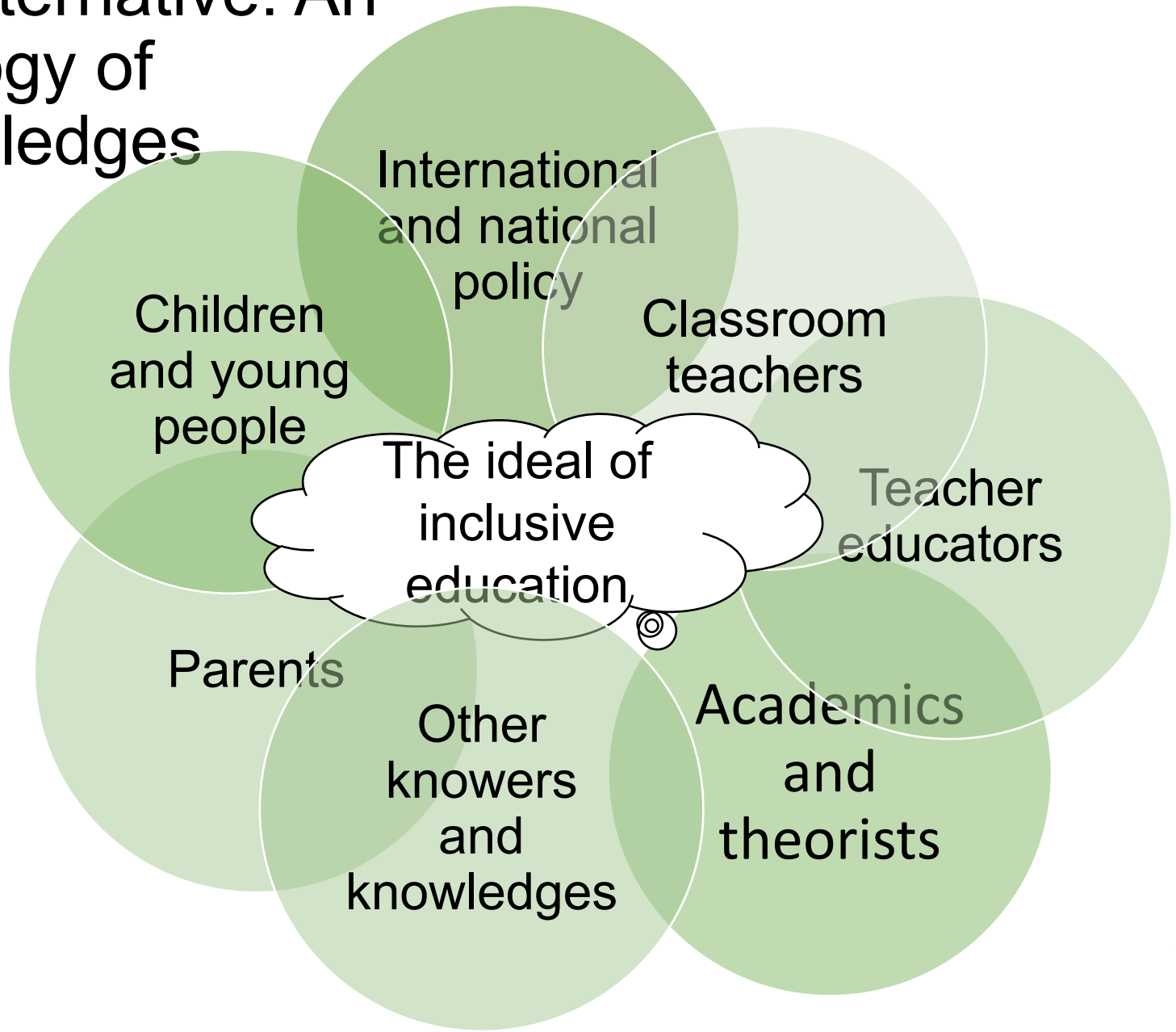
- Aspirational – vision setting
- Set priorities
- Practical guidelines and implementation expectations
- Common language for practice **but** makes knowledge claims beyond their remit

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Finally …

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An alternative: An ecology of knowledges



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Concluding challenge:

Recognise inclusive education as a robust **knowledge practice**

And its knowledge as a dynamic, diverse, interconnected and **complex ecology**

Where knowledge for and of inclusion and belonging is **entangled in its doing and being**

While **respecting local knowledge** and the complexities of context

Because then we may gain traction against exclusion and advance inclusion and belonging

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Questions for discussion and reflection

- Who do we hold responsible for the success or failure of inclusion and belonging?
- Why do we separate the idea of inclusion from its practice?
- Who talks to/at/with whom?
- Who are recognised as the experts in inclusion and belonging?
- Who is seen as having credible knowledge of or about inclusion and belonging in education?
- What changes are possible to disrupt silos and hierarchies of knowledge?

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