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

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Abstract

Inclusion and belonging are often understood through competing claims to expertise. Policymakers, researchers, teacher educators, teachers, parents, and children and young people each generate valuable knowledge about what inclusion is, how it is enacted, and why it matters. Yet these knowledges are frequently organised into silos and positioned within hierarchies that privilege some voices while marginalising others. Drawing on the concept of an ecology of knowledges, I use this presentation to challenge conventional assumptions about who is recognised as a legitimate knower about inclusion and belonging.

The presentation synthesises evidence from research conducted across diverse international contexts, including studies with teacher educators, teachers, parents of disabled children, young disabled refugees, policy documents, and the inclusive education research literature. Together, these studies demonstrate that knowledge for inclusion and belonging is distributed across multiple actors, shaped by context, and produced through interconnected relationships rather than through isolated forms of expertise.

Rather than viewing knowledge as a hierarchy, I propose an ecological perspective that recognises diversity, interdependence, complexity, and negotiation. I argue that advancing inclusion and belonging requires disrupting epistemic hierarchies, valuing local and experiential knowledge, and fostering dialogue across knowledge communities. An ecology of knowledges offers a productive framework for reimagining inclusive education as a dynamic knowledge practice capable of addressing exclusion and strengthening belonging.

Bio

Dr Elizabeth Walton is a Professor of Education and Associate Head of School responsible for Research and Knowledge Exchange in the School of Education at the University of Nottingham, UK. Her teaching, supervision and research work focus on inclusive education, educational exclusion, teacher education, and the sociology of knowledge. She holds a visiting professorship at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, is co-convenor of the UNESCO Chair for Teacher Education for Diversity and Development and is an elected member of the Academy of Science of South Africa. Her contributions to the field of education include journal editorships, service on research funding review panels, and as a trustee of a large Multi-Academy Trust.

Before entering higher education, Walton spent two decades working in schools in South Africa as a secondary school teacher and school leader, experience that continues to inform her commitment to more equitable and inclusive education systems. Her research draws on sociological, critical, decolonial and posthuman perspectives to advance both the theory and practice of inclusion.

Walton has published extensively in leading international journals and is the author of several influential books, including *The Language of Inclusive Education* (Routledge, 2016) and *The Knowledge of Inclusive Education* (Routledge, 2025). Her work has shaped international scholarship and practice on inclusion, belonging, teacher education, and educational justice. In addition to her academic work, Elizabeth has responsibility for the happiness and well-being of a demanding geriatric white cat.