

# Exchanges Featured Section: Inequality in Education – Innovation in Methods

## Introduction with reflections by Dr Nicola Ingram and Professor Melanie Nind

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**Abstract** *Against a backdrop of metamorphosis in the UK educational landscape and the increased focus on ‘innovation’ in research funding and postgraduate programmes, a conference entitled ‘Inequality in Education – Innovation in Methods’ (IEIM) was held at the University of Warwick in November 2014 to offer space to reflect on ‘inequality in education’ as a field of research and the impact, and future prospect for ‘innovation in method’ in this field. This article introduces this featured section, including reflections from Dr Nicola Ingram and Professor Melanie Nind, who both delivered keynote addresses at the conference.*

Keywords: Inequality; research methods; sociology of education

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**Peer review:** This article has been subject to a double blind peer review process



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### Introduction

Carli Ria Rowell and Siobhan Dytham

This featured section of Exchanges is based upon the conference 'Inequality in Education, innovation in methods', which arose from a funding proposal Siobhan and myself submitted to Warwick's ESRC Doctoral Training Centre competition for a doctoral event grant in December 2013. The aim of the doctoral events grant is to enable students to organise a one-day interdisciplinary postgraduate conference to be held at the University of Warwick during the academic year 2014-2015. Therefore, the conference and this featured section is a year in the making.

Siobhan and I met one year prior to submitting the proposal at the British Sociological Associations Education Study Group event 'Young People's Educational Identities in Challenging Times' to which Dr. Nicola Ingram is a co-convenor. Little did I know that my attendance at this event of which was driven to attend by sheer curiosity (I had not yet started my PhD) would provide the platform and networks for an event organised by Siobhan and me. The subsidiary aim of the events grant was to enhance work on individuals' PhDs or issues of mutual concern linking two or more PhD research projects. Thus, it was specified that the conference topic must be close to the areas of the proposers' dissertations and that the event should seek to bring together scholars working within that area. It is in this vein that the conference was structured around the themes of inequalities in education and innovation in methods. The resulting event together with this featured section of Exchanges reflects our interest in methodological advances within social science research and inequalities within education whether this is within the compulsory education system, special education or within the field of higher education.

Within the UK, the metamorphosis of the educational landscape has attracted significant debate amongst academics, politicians, educational practitioners, the media and lay persons. Issues such as the recent education cuts, the overhaul of GCSEs in England, the rise in tuition fees and the expansion, privatisation and casualization of UK universities, means that debate and research within the field of education is both timely and crucial. At the same time, the notion of 'innovation' has been placed at the heart of the methodological landscape. As such, many educational researchers, in focusing their scholarly attention to educational equality, have developed an array of innovative and exciting methodologies in order to access new data and new groups of people. Added to this, Social Science funding bodies are progressively inviting and fostering research proposals that are methodologically 'innovative'. Consequently, there is increased pressure for postgraduate research students to deliver 'innovative' social science research in order to demonstrate their competency within the global knowledge economy.

It is against this backdrop that we wanted to organise a conference that would afford our delegates the platform in which to exchange innovative methodological practices, sharing what works well and what does not, as well as exploring future possible practices that could be drawn upon when conducting social science research that seeks to explore and bring attention to educational inequality. At the same time we wanted the conference to take a critical stance on the idea of 'innovation', asking what is it, why do it and does it improve our research? Thus, from the critical training offered to delegates with an interest in innovation, a

space was provided for them to think more deeply about these ideas which, as already discussed, are becoming increasingly important.

The event – hosted in the Wolfson Research Exchange on Wednesday 12th November 2014 – was every success. In addition to the five students presenters, we had keynote presentations from Professor Melanie Nind (University of Southampton) and Dr. Nicola Ingram (University of Bath). In total, around 40 delegates attended, including academic members of staff and industry practitioners from the educational charity Teach First. Delegates represented a number of UK universities including Kent, Manchester, Keele, and London.

The conference featured presentations, keynotes and an interactive workshop in order to facilitate the exchange of innovative methodological practices. The day was structured around three themes that arose naturally from the abstracts submitted in response to an open call for papers. The first two themes were ‘Race and Class’ and ‘Innovative Research Methods’, followed by Dr. Nicola Ingram’s keynote ‘Boundary drawing? Experimenting with art to understand identity’. Dr. Ingram explored the use of visual methods such as Photoshop self-portraits, self-representational video, plasticine model-making, visual diaries and the uses of working with artists for research purposes. During Dr Ingram’s keynote, delegates participated in a 20 minute plasticine model-making interactive activity and ended with a discussion and questions from the audience regarding the use of plasticine model-making to explore identity. The activity required delegates to make a model of their academic self and ended with a critical discussion regarding the use of plasticine model-making to explore academic identity. The final theme was that of ‘Disability’ and the use of multimodal analysis, video ethnography and iPad applications was explored in relation to conducting research with and alongside students with autism. The day was drawn to a close by Professor Melanie Nind whose keynote ‘Changing the social relations of research – innovation and orthodoxy’ addressed the notion of innovative research methods.

In this featured section, we hear from postgraduate presenters [Farhat Syyeda](#), [Jessica Heal](#) and [Jacqui Shepherd](#) and keynotes Professor Melanie Nind and Dr Nicola Ingram (both keynote contributions are included below), who have written articles in which they discuss their contributions to the conference in greater detail. Farhat Batool Syyeda within her article entitled [‘A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words: Examining learners’ illustrations to understand Attitudes towards Mathematics’](#) discusses her experience of working with the freehand drawings of year 7 (KS3) and year 10 (KS4) (11 and 15 year old) students, in order to investigate their attitudes towards Mathematics. In Syyeda’s

research, the students were asked to create drawings to illustrate their vision of Maths and its impact on their lives as a way to offer students an alternative form of communication to express their thoughts and feelings about Mathematics. Secondly, in her article entitled [‘Research with School Students: Four Innovative Methods Used to Explore Effective Teaching’](#), Jessica Faye Heal outlines and critically discusses four research methods which were employed to enhance how students from low-income backgrounds engage in research exploring effective teaching. This article discusses the use of approaches which scaffold a semi-structured interview, a child-led classroom tour and a ‘draw and tell’ approach. The third and final student article is that of Jacqui Shepherd of which is entitled [‘Interrupted Interviews’: listening to young people with autism in transition to college’](#). Within her article Shepherd examines the methodological approaches such as visual methods using iPad applications and walking interviews to investigate the lived experiences of young people with autism as they made the transition from special schools to mainstream colleges of Further Education.

Further to this, Dr Nicola Ingram, in her article entitled ‘Boundary Drawing – art meets research’ ([see below](#)), explores using visual art in research and reflects on her personal experiences to discuss some of the advantages of this pairing. Finally, in an article entitled ‘Changing the social relations of research – innovation and orthodoxy’ ([see below](#)), Professor Melanie Nind reflects on ‘innovation’ in relation to the social relations of research and broader moves toward the democratisation of research. Professor Nind argues that ‘innovation may be less to do with methods as such and more about what the researcher sets out to do, including to transform inequalities in research power dynamics and to enhance social inclusion’ (Nind, 2015).

To summarise, the contributions to this special feature highlights that one of the central focuses of ‘innovation in methods’ was in relation to the participants of the research. Though there exists increasing pressure for research and researchers to be ‘innovative’ in either their methods or findings it was not this reason that drove our delegates to reconsider traditions and approaches to doing sociological research. It was instead the need to think anew, in order to include participants and explore areas of enquiry that would otherwise be excluded or constrained by traditional and existing methodological practices in qualitative research. This, along with issues of ethics and interpretation are discussed in the [final article](#) within this featured section.

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## **Boundary Drawing: art meets research**

Dr Nicola Ingram

As a former secondary school art teacher who has found her way into sociology I am interested in exploring what visual art can bring to research by way of method. My particular interest is around issues of identity and through my own experiences of creating art I have seen the potential of visual creativity for exploring and expressing ideas about the self. This has led me to experiment with the visual when conducting research, in the hope that through the process of creating an artifact (in whatever medium) I can access reflections that traditional oral based methods may struggle to reach. Admittedly, this experimentation has not always been successful but innovation never comes from playing it safe. I have experimented with Photoshop portraits, visual diaries, giving participants hand held video cameras, drawing, sculpture and Plasticine modeling. I have had the most success with Plasticine modeling and it became a key component of my PhD ethnographic research in schools in Belfast. The participants were given a range of different coloured Plasticine and asked to create models that represented who they are. After producing their models they were interviewed on a one to one basis and asked to explain what their model represented and this became the hook for a fairly unstructured interview. The strength of using this approach is that I was able to gather very in depth and reflective responses from my participants who were 15/16 year old working-class teenage boys (A group generally acknowledged to be difficult to engage with). See **Ingram (2011)** for some detail on the findings of this research and the responses of the young men in relation to their models. Also see **Abrahams and Ingram (2014)** for further research that builds upon this method.

Most recently I have been further experimenting with methods by working with the artist, Barry Sykes, at the University of Bath. I found it really fruitful to work with an artist and take myself outside my research comfort zone. It has been a way to play with research methods without being under any pressure to actually produce any research, as it was something I got involved with outside of a formal research project. There was something very liberating about removing all anxiety about getting it wrong and I think that this absence of anxiety fed the creative process. We developed some ideas based on a combination of both our interests. Barry was interested in the space of the university and I was interested in students' transitions from that space and the places they hoped to

occupy in the future. Our basic plan was to ask students to create artifacts from different materials which represented aspects of their experience of the university and their hopes, aspirations and plans for the future. The materials were supplied by the artist and were a range of random items that he was able to purchase on campus (including cherry tomatoes, balsa wood, tictacs, paracetamol, rubber bands, and paper). When working with art materials for the purpose of research it is good practice to be as non-directive as possible so as to not lead the participants to create or say particular things. The eventual idea we agreed on was to ask the students to create a series of 'identity-objects' in response to a list of words. The words were 'home', 'refuge', 'work', and 'future'.

What resulted was the creation of a number of very thoughtful and thought-provoking responses. The students created mini sculptures that were imbued with meaning about their identities and we shared the meaning of our objects in the group. Each person had the opportunity to talk about what they had created and what it represented and then Barry and I asked some probing questions to find out more. This worked as a group because the students were all friends and the group was intimate, involving four students, the artist and me. There are particular ethical issues with asking people to reflect on the personal within group settings, specifically the notion of exposing and exploring aspects of the self. Nevertheless there was a trust amongst the participants that allowed this to be a successful way to conduct the workshop. Additionally both Barry and I participated in the production of 'identity-objects' and talked openly about what they meant to us, exposing some personal aspects of ourselves. Arguably, this sharing enabled openness amongst all participants. Moreover, part of the power of creating before talking is that the meaning of the object can remain hidden if the participant wishes it to do so. It is possible for the participant to reveal only aspects of its meaning and what they are comfortable sharing. In this way visual methods can have an ethical component built into it as the participant has control over what is said and has time to consider this as they make their object.

Using art can help to achieve greater depth than straightforward one to one interviewing in research responses from participants. If people are asked to create something it affords thinking time in relation to a question and it allows for reflection. Furthermore when discussing what they have created participants' focus is deflected from the self-conscious 'I' to describing the meaning of an object, therefore breaking down some of the potential discomforts of focusing on talking about the self. Visual art can be used as a powerful research tool, and in research on

educational inequalities can help to access the voices of the marginalized.

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## Changing the social relations of research – innovation and orthodoxy

Professor Melanie Nind

The ESRC Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Conference and Workshop on 'Inequality in Education –Innovation in Methods' provided an opportunity for participants and speakers to explore the methodological challenges and opportunities associated with researching inequality, or doing research in ways that challenge inequality. Following on from papers on race and class, innovative methods, and disability, the closing keynote needed to step back and look at the changing social relations of research. I therefore began by looking at the nature of innovation in methods and reasons for innovating, moving on to looking at innovation beyond methods in broader research dynamics and ending by exploring the democratisation of research.

Based on research conducted in the National Centre for Research Methods (**Nind et al. 2013; Wiles et al. 2013**) I see innovation in qualitative social research methods as rooted in genuine desire to improve some aspect of the research process as well as in complex social relations including the valued placed on innovation by commissioners and evaluators of research. Innovation can comprise developments to established methods as well as the development of new methods, and may involve methods crossing disciplinary boundaries as in Nicola Ingram's amalgam of art and social science. It is contested whether an

innovation has to have been taken up by the wider social science community (**Taylor and Coffey 2008**) or not yet filtered through to the mainstream (**Xenitidou and Gilbert 2009**).

Research into three cases of innovation showed a relationship between making changes and ethical concerns (**Nind et al., 2013**). The cases were Robert Kozinets' netnography, Mary Kellett's child-led research and David Gauntlett's creative exploratory work with Lego bricks. This research saw innovators motivated by the desire to address shortcomings and ethical concerns and going on to take and manage risks in doing so. For the conference, the pertinent question was where researching inequality in education – or any kind of social injustice – might push innovative researchers methodologically.

Research concerning with people who have been marginalised and had limited voice in research and sometimes even limited representation is changing. **Kellett (2005)**, for example, has been vociferous about her desire to empower children to do their own research, which led to her programme of research training for children. This emanates from a standpoint epistemology in which children are seen as unique knowers of their worlds as children. Similarly, people with learning disabilities have advocated for the importance of their empathy as researchers of other people with learning disabilities, their expertise by experience, and their inclusion in – and not rejection by – the research community (**Townson et al. 2004**). Moving toward more participatory research methods and approaches is frequently seen as 'the right thing to do' (**Holland et al. 2008**), redressing the wrongs of labelling, pathologizing, colonizing (see **Walmsley and Johnson 2003; Smith 2012**).

Sometimes the innovation is in the methods themselves, as with so-called accessible or child-friendly methods, sometimes it is with the level of dialogue and co-construction between researchers and participants including a blurring of roles, and sometimes it is in who leads the research, a necessity for research to be deemed emancipatory. But there are some important tensions in this arena of inclusive (i.e. participatory/emancipatory) research. Firstly, people from marginalised groups getting involved with conducting research are seen as needing to learn and to adopt research conventions to be taken seriously. This shapes lay researchers in our likeness. Being not too innovative or different is necessary to be more successful. Academic gatekeeping keeps in check the dangerous world of challenges to who does research and how, so that if what is done is seen as too different or challenging it is deemed not to be research at all.

Secondly, there is a danger of replacing one essentialism with another - of replacing the knowledge of academics with the knowledge of experts

by experience, rather than bringing the different ways of knowing into constructive dialogue. This can also lead to new groups being silenced in the research, such as those in support roles who also often occupy marginal status. It is important to remember that all voices are mediated, no knowledge exists in a vacuum, and so the desire to get at pure experience or unsullied opinion is misjudged. Moreover, there is a danger – if studies become so grounded in the lived experience – that they can fail to generate the abstraction necessary for advances in theoretical understanding.

Concerns with inequality underpin the turn towards democratisation, to broader, more equal participation and consultation. This in turn underpins an interest in research that in some way changes the dynamic between research/researchers and the people who have traditionally been the objects of that research. This means a changing discourse from research on people, to research with those people, and perhaps by or for them. It raises questions about who owns the research problem, who initiates the research, in whose interests it is conducted, who has control over the processes and outcomes and who produces the knowledge claims and owns the research. Thus, democratic or inclusive research involves a broader range of knowledge-makers, perhaps even generating meaningful social transformation (see **Byrne et al. 2009**).

Amid these turns towards the democratization of research, innovation in methods is not the point – the point is innovation in what the researcher sets out to do. The purpose is broader than adding to the body of knowledge or even that knowledge having impact. It is to do something new for those involved and affected, if not always to do something new methodologically. A new research agenda emerges to transcend inequalities in research power dynamics, demonstrate competence of marginalised groups, create knowledge that is more valid and authentic, enable self-development, political agency, increased confidence and skills, and lead to more active participation and enhanced social inclusion (**Nind and Vinha 2014**). This is the wider picture I wanted conference participants to take away for reflection.

Note: The keynote and paper draws heavily on **Nind, M. (2014)** *What is Inclusive Research?* London: Bloomsbury Academic.

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### To cite this article:

Rowell, C. R. Dytham, S., Ingram, N. & Nind, M. (2015). Inequality in Education – Innovation in Methods Introduction with reflections by Dr Nicola Ingram and Professor Melanie Nind. *Exchanges: The Warwick Research Journal*, 2(2), 224-233. Retrieved from: <http://exchanges.warwick.ac.uk/index.php/exchanges/article/view/65>