

**The “Inclusion” of Students with Vision Impairments:  
Generational Perspectives in Australia**

**Ben Whitburn**

Faculty of Arts and Education  
Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia

*Author Note*

My sincere gratitude goes to the students who participated in interviews for their frank and honest contributions to this research.

### **Abstract**

In this paper I draw upon findings of a recent qualitative project conducted in Queensland, Australia in which all actors – the researcher and 5 participants aged 13-17 years — were linked together by our shared experiences of being students with impaired vision (VI) and who were educated in inclusive secondary schools in Australia during the last two decades. The narrative demonstrates the alienating legacy of two everyday routines of schooling, the placement and the daily commute. In the paper I show how referential knowledge acquisition of a trans-identity research alliance can reveal barriers to inclusion that might be ordinarily overlooked. Theoretically I map the research relationship formed between myself and participants using both Foucault’s analysis of how human beings are made subjects (1982) and Bourdieu’s understanding of reflexive interviewing in qualitative research (1998). The empirical contribution of this paper is to demonstrate how special education discourses render subjects more “special” than the sum of their actual impairments, and methodologically to highlight the role of qualitative inquiry in the field of inclusive schooling.

*Keywords:* Vision impairment; School placement; School commute; Critical disability studies; Trans-identity research alliance; Post-structural analysis

“They may guess that we’re different some way [beyond]... visually impaired. Maybe they consider us to be just different I guess.” (17-year-old “included” student)

“I know I’ve got a problem, And that’s why you have to be in the SEP [special education program] ‘cause, you’ve got a problem. But yeah. It annoys me because I’ve got a problem. I just want to be normal.” (13-year-old “included” student)

## **Introduction**

The above excerpts taken from interview data that informed a study with young people with vision impairment, who attended an inclusive secondary school in the Australian State of Queensland, form the basis of the key arguments presented in this paper. The young people – there were five in all – attended the same public school in Queensland in 2010 and each one was enrolled via a special education program (SEP) that supported students with a range of impairments to ‘integrate’ into mainstream classes. Each student attended lessons for most – if not all of the school day — and were generally supported by paraprofessionals to do so. In the remarks above, the students referred explicitly to the differences that they perceived within the school that to them, consisted of the abnormal kids with disabilities, and the normal kids without.

Placing themselves on the pejorative side of this binary because of their vision loss, these students described the actions of stakeholders (teachers, specialist support staff, paraprofessionals, transport providers, friends and less acquainted peers) together with themselves to a degree that reinforced their marginalisation. The school provided the students with “heavy” paraprofessional support that undermined their autonomy and contributed to their social exclusion in classes (Whitburn, 2013a). Consequently, as affirmed in the above quotes, the young people’s perceptions of their inclusion in the school demonstrate that on the whole they felt as if they were disabled (intended as a verb rather than an adjective) beyond the sum of their actual impairments. This was the case despite the fact that the young people were positive toward their schooling. Their academic and sporting achievements, the support they received from some personnel, and the friends that they had made (Whitburn, 2013b) were all notable achievements. Nevertheless, the cloud of anomaly rendered their inclusion in the school as illusionary (Graham & Slee, 2008; Hodkinson, 2012a).

Recognising that there are stories embedded in all social discourse, Gough (2010) encourages researchers to write narrative as an ancillary research practice. In this paper I am using the term ‘trans-identity research alliance’ (Slee, 2011) to mean a participatory approach to research in which a group –including the researcher—is made up of members who have shared experiences. I conclude by theorising such an alliance using Foucault’s concepts of how human beings are made subjects (1982) and Bourdieu’s flexibility in qualitative inquiry (1998). But first it seems appropriate to situate this research.

## **Being on the Inside**

Having severely impaired vision, and also having attended a similar school as the young people in the 1990s, entering the school site as the researcher bestowed me certain privileges. My experiences of ducking and weaving the deficit discourse on account of my impairment has led me to research with a transformative agenda for young people with disabilities. In short, following Moss’s (2012) suggestion, my intention is to uncover the barriers to inclusion from the

perspectives of those on the inside. Disability studies undertaken with a transformative agenda require that researchers are grounded within the cultures that they investigate (Mertens, Sullivan & Stace, 2011). With an eye on inclusive ideals, researchers with disabilities who work within education can challenge traditional special provision (Slee, 1996), which to others, may make the familiar look strange (Biesta, Allan & Edwards, 2011). I was therefore a participant in this action research study.

For my part, I related to the young people's sense of uneasiness about inclusion in school, and indeed I carry similar anxieties outside of it (Whitburn, 2013c). My experiences of being one of the few students with VI in a school that was attended by young people who did not present with disabilities also led me to follow to some extent particular lines of questioning.

This does not mean, however, that my position privileges this research in both its processes and conclusions. Nor do I hold naive notions about my ability to emancipate students with impairments in schools simply by working with them to make qualitative inquiries into the education system. Rather, I draw on referential knowledge (Baret, 1998) (both theirs and mine) – that is, a shared understanding of what we each take for granted as innocuous and familiar about having an impairment in an inclusive school, which when considered in the interview situation, allows participants to “think otherwise” (Ball, 2006 p. 5).

Through lengthy discussions about what the young people liked and did not like about their schooling, they began to define for themselves what inclusive schooling should look like, and where it had gone wrong. As Baret (1998, p. 18) suggests, “Once people become aware of the assumptions or rules upon which they have hitherto unconsciously drawn, and once they realize how radically different these were in the past, then the strength of these assumptions or rules is potentially undermined”. McWilliams (2003), who draws on this concept, explains further: “self-referential knowledge is not specifically knowledge that informs one about oneself (e.g., critical self-reflection) but, rather, asks about those taken for granted knowledges through which we produce ourselves as works of art (e.g., as 'critically self-reflective')” (pp. 61-62).

### **Generation Perspectives on the School Placement and Commute**

This study is framed by a participatory perspective– the investigation of inclusive schooling from a group of insiders with impaired vision. In particular, this paper is based on the analysis of two dominant themes that emerged out of the research, school placement and the school commute, and the alienating legacy produced through the entanglement of both. I undertook this study with a group of young people with VI because I was motivated to elucidate current students' perspectives of their schooling in a system that we now regard as inclusive (Whitburn, 2013b). This research then is limited by my personal perspective.

In Australia, and indeed throughout the world, VI is a low-incidence disability. There are approximately 3000 students with VI who attend Australian schools and who receive support to do so (ABF, 2008). In inclusive schools moreover, experience in various projects has shown me that only a very small number of students with VI attend any one setting. I wanted to conduct my research in a single school. Thus, I was driven to work with a very small sample size. This can be advantageous, as Ball (2006) argues, because working small can provide researchers with a powerful analytical case.

Initially I framed the study using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) formulation of grounded theory. Research that is framed in the grounded theory perspective seeks first and foremost to conceptualise only that which is found in the field. As such, existent literature, that may adversely impact the study by explaining instances external to the field, is ignored until well after

data collection and analysis so that it may be contextualized more appropriately. Thus, grounded theory offers a useful framework that can be used to genuinely learn about students' experiences. I detail the use of this framework more in the data analysis section of this paper.

### **Participants**

One girl and four boys participated in this study. They ranged in grades 8-12 inclusive, and were aged between 13-17 years. While two of the participants lived locally to the school, the other three lived more than 20 kilometres from it. To protect the identity of the school and participants, comments are not assigned to pseudonyms in this paper. At the time that I conducted the fieldwork, the participants were the only students enrolled in the school who had VI and were supported under the umbrella of the SEP. Each of them had VI to somewhat divergent lengths, and exemplary of our shared understanding of living with VI more generally, not once did we discuss causes, cures, nor levels of visual acuity. Instead we focused on how having VI impacted their inclusion.

As expected however, the young people spoke of a range of visual aids and assistive technology that they used at school, including laptop computers with speech output, screen magnification equipment, handheld magnifiers, Braille and large print resources. Most also received individual support from paraprofessionals in lessons. Only one of the five walked with a white cane. I, meanwhile, have very slight vision mostly in my left eye, and I make daily use of Braille and a computer with screen reading software. My white cane I use only when in unfamiliar territory, or when in adverse weather conditions which cause my auditory orientation to go askew.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data I draw on in this paper was collected through more than 20 hours of individual and focus group interviews which I recorded with the young people's permission. I then transcribed each interview verbatim. Recognising that Strauss and Corbin's (1990) prescription of grounded theory – which I used initially to frame this study – is ontologically and epistemologically “grounded” in postpositivist values, I look to Charmaz (2006, 2011) and Clarke (2005) for a constructivist stance on the framework. Data analysis (subsequent to the study) is thus framed in more socially relevant perspectives. I also include my own narrative with the aim of illustrating how experience influences my line of inquiry, and how I use this referential knowledge to construct this research with the young people.

In line with these objectives, Charmaz (2011) has developed the constructivist grounded theory framework so that it accounts for and introduces criticality. She contends that through broadening the scope of the grounded theory framework, more socially critical research can be produced. As she argues, “The critical stance of social justice inquiry combined with its structural focus can aid grounded theorists to locate subjective and collective experience in larger structures and increase understanding of how these structures work” (p. 362). This encapsulates the objective of analysis of the trans-identity research alliance in the current paper, which I discuss in more detail after presenting the narrative.

### **Analysing “Our” Inclusion**

My intention was to involve participants in all phases of the research, including the analysis phase. In a focus group interview in a small meeting room on the final day of data collection, I presented abstracted findings that I had gleaned from previous interviews to the

group of young people, to verify their applicability. This discussion involved extensive dialogue about the use of accessible resources, effective and ineffective teacher pedagogy, making and interacting with friends, receiving paraprofessional support, and the students' overall denotation of inclusive schooling. The analysis we conducted in that room on that day lead one participant who had low vision to conclude that "mainstream" school for him was like being on "A waterslide without any water. You get stuck halfway down." In subsequent analysis of the data I often return to this students' comment. His expression even resonated with my own schooling experiences. Thus, inclusive schooling was then, as it seemingly remains to be now, "a battle ground between absence and a forced presence" (Hodkinson, 2012b, 678).

### **A Matter of Placement**

Concurrently, Clarke (2005) argues that researchers can follow Foucault's lead in using situational analyses of discourses such as narrative to expand the relevance of grounded theory in capturing accurate depictions of social life. Gough (2010) encourages researchers to use narrative as a way of performing an inquiry. Here I blend my own narrative with research findings to elucidate how having to attend a particular school and in turn having to commute to it in part constituted our experiences of inclusion at high school.

### **The Issue of School Placement**

But first, I want to foreground the issue of school placement. In Australia, the Education (General Provisions) Act 2006 legislates that all students must be able to both attend and be included in their local schools. While this concept works nicely on paper, students with disabilities in Queensland are encouraged to attend public schools which have special education programs (Education Queensland, 2007), which are sparsely located throughout the state. This provides a prime example of how political and philosophical conjecture about inclusive schooling has greater reach than tangible practice (Hodkinson, 2010). While families may choose to have their children enrolled in particular schools for specific reasons in spite of their locations, for children and young people with impairments, this choice is limited.

Unless by happenstance families with children who have diagnosed impairments live within certain catchment boundaries, the schools equipped with special education provision are invariably located at some distance from their homes. In turn this means that they must commute to the schools that they attend. Again in Queensland, students can either make their way to school under their own steam (i.e. by public transport if they are able, or via another arrangement), or they may be entitled to take advantage of the School Transport Assistance Program for Students with Disabilities (Education Queensland, 2008), which ensures that through contractual obligation with the education authority, a transport company will convey them to and from their school. I turn now to a presentation of the young people's accounts of their placement in the high school. This is followed by a short narrative about my own experiences of school placement and the commute, and that of participants, which illustrates that an entanglement of both rendered their inclusion illusory.

### **Transitioning to a New High School**

That the research setting was a secondary school emphasised the matter of placement and the commute for participants in different ways, depending on where they lived. Each participant had attended a primary school that was similarly appointed to the research setting. Four of the young people had attended a primary school that was appointed with a special education unit; however it was located more than 20 kilometres away from the research setting. Three of these participants lived closer to the distant primary school. As such, they described having to start traveling up to 25 kilometres each way when they enrolled in to the research setting, because it was “apparently the only high school that has a visual education unit” nearby. One participant remarked, “If I hadn’t of [sic] gone here, I reckon I would have bugged my parents to go to [a local high school]”. He explained that all of his friends had transitioned to schools local to that area, and that he lamented the fact that “I can’t see any of my friends anymore from there”. Each of these young people explained that although they each had been in well-established friendship groups at primary school, they felt isolated because they did not have friends from the high school who lived nearby.

Clearly, having existing friendship networks impacted the students’ transition. But it also impacted their sense of inclusion. Participants who came to the school alone were able to eventually establish friendships with like-minded, sighted peers who shared common interests. However, they encountered some variation. They all described being subjected to negative attitudes from others, and one believed that sighted students “excluded altogether” participants from the social hierarchy within the school, when looking to form friendships. The same participant noted, “It’s just other people. [It’s] all ‘the assumption thing’ going on about blind people”. When I encouraged this participant to elaborate on his comments, he suggested that other students pigeonhole those with VI as being more disabled than their actual impairments. He further described how he had been frustrated in his attempts to make friends at the school. “When you come into a high school without any friends it’s hard especially if you’re visually impaired you can’t go socially networking as easily”.

The fifth participant coincidentally lived locally to the research setting, though she had attended the distant primary school. While she described losing friends from primary school, she had a wide social circle of friends from the local area who also attended the research setting. She lamented losing friends that she had made during her primary education; however she spoke excitedly about her transition to the high school.

## **Reflexive Inquiry**

I want to briefly step back from this presentation of findings to consider how particular experiences of my own steered my inquiry in the area of school placement, transport options and social inclusion. Having learned about the experiences and concerns of the young people about school placement and its implications on their inclusion, I was surprised to find that they closely mirrored my own. I had attended a secondary school of which I lived well outside the catchment area, for reasons consistent with those of the participants. Living at a distance implies that lengthy hours will be spent travelling to and from school, and it is to a discussion of this theme that I now turn. I then present an analysis of the young people’s school commute and its impact on their sense of inclusion.

## **Arriving in Style? My School Commute**

In my first year of secondary school, a luxury stretch limousine company won the tender to provide me with school travel as part of the School Transport Assistance Program for Students with Disabilities (Education Queensland, 2008). There were seven students in all whom the limousine provided passage. Given that I lived the greatest distance from the school, I was the passenger on the driver's manifest whose driveway the empty limousine rolled into at about 7:30 a.m. each weekday morning, in front of the neighbourhood kids who were preparing to go to the local school.

Every morning, embarrassed by the presence of an enormous empty, luxury, pink vehicle in my driveway, I would dash out of my house with my head down, in the direction of the limousine. My aim was to drop into the back passenger door that the smartly suited driver had opened for me as quickly as possible, to avoid the humiliation I associated with the stares and comments of others.

At my school, the first bell sounded at 8:50 a.m., but I would need all of that time to arrive, as we would stop in to various other neighbourhoods on the way to collect the other six students who used the service. Invariably the limousine fought through heavy peak-hour traffic to arrive at students' doors to find that they were not attending school on a particular day, though they had neglected to inform the company. Despite the early start, I would typically arrive late to school, though I welcomed this, as it meant that other students would have already gone into classes and were not there to witness the grand arrival.

In the afternoon, I would reticently jump into the limousine after the final bell sounded alongside all of the other "special" students who were availed of the service. I was then the last to alight at the end of a long day about an hour and a half after school had ended. Of course, the same neighbourhood kids were there to watch me clamber out of the back door of the limousine; they had been there for hours, playing in front of their homes. I, on the other hand, hastily disappeared inside my house and did not emerge until the following day, when I would be forced to endure the limousine trip once again.

Aside from the embarrassment that limousine travel caused me because of my sensitivity to how others viewed my apparent dependency on the service – a luxury one at that generally reserved for the rich and famous – a major indignity of its provision was that it stripped me of my autonomy, despite providing me physical access to the school. I was made to depend on a service that I found discomforting, and I had to wait for up to 3 hours per day on account of others rather than being permitted to get to school under my own steam.

The angst bequeathed me by the daily commute by limousine vehemently spurred me into action. I opted to take intensive orientation and mobility training (O&M) from the extra core curriculum (ECC) for students with VI and other disabilities (Hatlen, 1996). A mobility instructor visited the school each week to provide me with training. And after a full year of weekly instruction for which I jettisoned Wednesday afternoon sporting activities with my peers, I was granted the right to independently catch the bus for school travel only.

However, despite gaining more autonomy in commuting to and from school at least, the public bus presented me with a new set of challenges. The buses would seldom run faithfully to the schedule. I was unable therefore to use my watch as a way of predicting which bus was approaching. I would often wave down a bus to learn from its driver that it was the wrong one, invariably while the one I wanted to catch rattled by. I was typically reticent to tell drivers that I could not read the bus's destination board, though equally embarrassed to ask for information from drivers without declaring my impairment for fear of being regarded as disabled, or even

worse, ignorant. This too presented a twice daily apprehension from which I was mercifully relieved on the odd occasion my parents would opt to drive me to school.

Bus travel did however provide me with the opportunity to blend in with my peers, as I lined up to board, pay and take a seat alongside them. Given the distance I lived from the school, I was also on the bus when they boarded in the morning and disembarked in the afternoons along the way. Though to me, it was all worth it; travel time was cut down from one and a half hours to thirty minutes, and at least I finally blended in with my peers.

### **Reflexive Questioning: Let's Talk About Transport**

Memories of my daily commute to the school in which I had been placed motivated me to inquire at some length how the young people who participated in the study physically accessed the school campus from their homes. Moreover, I was eager to learn how they felt that it impacted their inclusion. I learned that participants either travelled by taxi or the public bus, and I now turn to a discussion of these forms of transport and their social implications for participants.

The young people revealed in interviews that they had mixed feelings about the transport upon which they relied for school travel. The specific options available to them carried social ramifications that extended beyond the sum of their impairments: each available option bound them to the special education discourse that was ever-present in their school lives.

### **Taxi Travel**

The young people who relied on the taxi service were uneasy about its provision. Most reported that it was a “vehicle” through which their differences from the normal, sighted student were accentuated, which gave peers grounds to cast negative attitudes towards them. As one participant observed “I actually really hate catching the taxi. I don't like it at all.” She went on to explain that when she had first started attending the school by taxi, other students habitually taunted her, saying that she was stupid. This was, she reported, because all students at the school recognised that the taxi service was reserved for students who were in the special education program. “[Other students] know that the only people who catch the taxis are the SEU-ers [special education unit students], so more people know that I'm in the SEU”. Her reliance on the taxi thus linked her in a public way to the deficit discourse that encircled SEP, of which it was apparently accepted that all members were inferior. Consequently, as she exclaimed “I feel really embarrassed. Really, really embarrassed with the taxi.”

The others who relied on taxis for school travel lived more than 20 kilometres from the campus. All of these participants observed that it was “tedious” having to get out of bed early each morning to travel such a long distance to school. They also indicated that there were negative ramifications associated with living at a distance from school on their social lives. Despite having made friends at the research setting, those reliant on taxis lamented that they were unable to travel with them after school, in a similar way to local, sighted students who they acknowledged could typically travel by bus, bicycle or by foot. Further, older participants were concerned that that they could not attend social events with friends without extensive preparation with their parents or guardians. While this assertion was not related to taxis and school travel per se, this was one avenue through which the young people understood a tacit divide that existed between themselves and sighted students.

On the whole, having to travel 20 km each way in order to be “included” in a community demonstrates the paradox of their inclusion. For the young people in this predicament, having to

attend a distant school meant having fewer opportunities to make friends from their home neighbourhoods, and the special provision afforded them at school ensured that socialisation during contact hours was also difficult.

### **Bus Travel**

Only one participant relied on the public bus service for school travel. His story about living locally and using the bus provided a useful juxtaposition for this analysis. This participant had some functional vision, and noted that people “can’t really tell that I’ve got a vision problem because I don’t use a cane or anything. And so, I think they act more normally around me”. The confidence afforded him through passing as a “normal” person who did not present with a disability, however, unraveled when he went to catch a bus.

Notwithstanding his use of some limited vision, his comprehensive understanding of the bus network, and knowledge of the local geography, the school commute presented obstacles. He described in some detail the difficulties that he often encountered in reading bus destination boards unless the vehicles were stationary. This resulted in a sense of discomfort for him, as he related. “I wouldn’t feel comfortable asking a ... bus, like, stopping a ... bus and then asking what bus it is, because I’d feel kind of bad if it wasn’t the bus I wanted to catch.”

It emerged in further interviews that this participant was anxious about bus travel for multiple reasons. First, his inability to identify visual information without difficulty adversely impacted his sense of autonomy. That his VI was not outwardly apparent added considerably to his sense of uneasiness, as it was this that placed him in a position of dependence on potentially insensitive bus drivers, and it meant he could no longer hide his vulnerability. Therefore, although he autonomously travelled to school, he was unable to conduct each journey with absolute independence. As he noted:

Not looking visually impaired ... [bus drivers] would probably think I’m having a go at them for stopping them and then not wanting to get on the bus. Because they’d probably think that, ‘oh, he’d be able to see, why did he stop the bus if he didn’t want to get on it’. They probably think I’m an idiot or something.

For him, the real danger revolved around his difference – his impaired vision as opposed to the able-bodied normal student. However, it transcended a fear of being identified as having VI, to being labelled “an idiot” because of his difficulty reading bus destination boards. When this difficulty arose, i.e. when a bus was too far away or in motion, his apparent idiocy was clarified, and he could no longer hide his vulnerability by blending in as a “normal” student.

### **What About Alternatives?**

It appeared then, that the young people had realised the impasse of their situation, or as one participant had described it previously, they found themselves stuck halfway down the waterless waterslide. When I asked them how they might prefer things to be, all of the participants who relied on taxis affirmed that they would prefer to live locally to the school so that they could be closer to their friends, and could travel independently; one participant even spoke candidly about his family’s plans to move to the neighbourhood. The other participant who lived locally was unsure that his situation could be improved.

## **How Did We Get Here?**

Notwithstanding unprecedented moves toward social justice in qualitative inquiry in education (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011), research that focuses specifically on the inclusion of students with disabilities in schools has been reticent to embrace these ideals. Research that is aimed at improving the conditions of inclusive schooling has instead remained entrenched in the deficit discourse. The medical expertise-driven theory of tragedy that is ascribed to specific population groups whose members identify as disabled has continued to proliferate (Goodley, 2011; Oliver, 2009; Oliver & Barnes, 2012).

By this I refer specifically to the prolongation of unheard voices; the voices of the young people with disabilities who are pushed to the fringes of the “inclusive” school under the guise of inclusion. In the words of Ferri (2009, p. 421), “Because students are positioned as objects of study—as problems to correct or remediate—their voices and perspectives remain silenced and devalued just as their bodies remained segregated and marginalized.” Therefore, the alternate conceptions of inclusive schooling as young people with disabilities produce them remain ignored, despite the fact that they can elucidate new ways of thinking about inclusion.

## **Critical Disability Studies Meets Educational Research**

Reaction in both the academic and political spheres to the dominance of the medical and individual models of disability have prompted the conception of critical disability studies (CDS). CDS are principally aimed at overturning the ways in which disability is perceived as a negative construct within society (Devlin & Pothier, 2006; Goodley, 2011; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Mertens et al., 2011). CDS have an agenda to go beyond mere attainment of intangible rights for people with disabilities, to their genuine inclusion into social discourse.

Emphasis is placed on the constructs of power (and/or powerlessness) and context in CDS. The lived experiences of people with disabilities fuel research, which chiefly demonstrate real or perceived incapacities to exist on a level playing field with others from the standpoint of societal norms. Moreover, as Meekosha and Shuttleworth Point out, CDS moves away from the dominant social versus medical binary of disability. Some authors who practice in inclusive education research recognise the importance of greater intellectual engagement with (as opposed to on) marginalised groups in inclusive settings (Ainscow, 2005; Allan, 2008, 2010; Curt & Clarke, 2005; Ferri, 2009; Hodkinson, 2012ab; Moss, 2012; Slee, 2011).

However, therein lays the paradox: apart from research conducted by authors including those cited above whom actively seek to advance social development for people with (and without) disabilities, few studies appear to have been undertaken that explicitly seek to know how students with impairments who attend inclusive settings experience and hence produce meaning of inclusive schooling. It must not be forgotten that research is a social act (Barton, 2005). Further, despite the existence of progressive policy and practices that aim to include marginalised students, the voiced experiences of students (and other stakeholders in education) must be heard to better interpret exclusion, both inside and outside schools (Moss, 2012).

## **The Restorative Task of a Trans-identity Research Alliance**

When foregrounding his concerns about the questionability of inclusive education in its current manifestation, Slee (2011) advances a series of restorative tasks of research in the field,

aimed at evolving social justice through honouring voice and insider perspectives with participatory research. One of them is to form trans-identity research alliances. Here I take this term to mean a union of members of a group of people who have experienced marginalization in a similar way. Such an alliance, as Slee claims, can be used to examine institutional repression through collective experience. Slee argues that this allows for the reframing of inclusive education as a political project that accounts for identity differences, experiences of oppression and disadvantage. This work builds on Allan's argument (2008) that the central focus of educational research should be to examine values and power. She notes that the views of children with disabilities and their families are an appropriate starting point to direct such inquiries.

### **Constituted Subjectivities and Inclusion at School**

My objective now is to begin to theorise the trans-identity research alliance that formed between me – the researcher – and the young people who participated in this study. The young people's accounts in which they elucidated how the school placement and the daily commute constituted their subjectivities as “included” students resonated loudly with my own experiences, and even surpassed them in some instances. This research revealed many wide and varied stories such as the ones presented here that described various factors that impacted the young people's experiences of inclusion in the school in which they were placed. My own experiences, moreover, led me to draw these details out in more detail in discussions with the participants.

### **Conceptualising the Terrain of the Trans-identity Research Alliance**

The underlying epistemology at work in this study is shared understanding among both myself –the researcher – and participants constituted through our collective histories. Referential knowledge acquisition – that is, an examination of the unfamiliar to access the generally taken for granted (Baret, 1998) enabled participants to reach their own conclusions about their schooling. Foucault (1982) offers two points of departure from which we can check that we are able to conceptualise relations of power and how they objectivise us as subjects: (i) from having a historical awareness of our circumstances, and (ii) being on familiar terms with the type of reality that is being interpreted. In the following sections, I examine these points and their relevance to the research.

#### **1. A Historical Awareness of Circumstance**

The young people and I had much in common. Ontologically we shared an understanding of what it is like to live with VI, along with the socially mandated effects of various aspects of our “inclusion” such as the commute to school, teacher and support practices, and socialisation. This familiarity is the catalyst that elicits more profundity from a trans-identity research alliance. My own history enabled me to put questions to research participants based on my own experiences. Bourdieu (1998, p. 610) argues that close proximity and shared familiarity between researchers and study participants can enhance the role of interviews, not least because:

someone sharing virtually all the characteristics capable of operating as major explanatory factors of that person's practices and representations, and linked to them by close familiarity, [means that] their questions spring from their dispositions, objectively attuned to those of the respondent.

My awareness then is what moved me to question the young people about school placement and transport to such a degree that their embodied experiences demonstrate how it in part constituted their inclusion, and their position within the normal and abnormal dichotomy that evidently existed in their lives.

## **2. Being on Familiar Terms with the Type of Reality that is Being Interpreted**

Another feature of the familiarity between researcher and participants is the way in which interpretation is directed. Bourdieu (1998) explains that in an ideological sense, “researchers who are socially very close to their respondents provide them with guarantees against the threat of having subjective reasoning reduced to objective causes, and having choices experienced as free turned into objective determinisms uncovered by analysis. (p. 609). Whether or not this was important to the young people, it was to me in employing a participatory research paradigm. I pledged loyalty to the young people, and assured them I was interested in their conception of inclusion rather than that of educators. This ethical action towards inclusion (Allan, 2008) is derived from personal experiences of marginalisation, and as Foucault (1988, p. 321) insists, it is born from “a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look at the same things in a different way.”

To conduct research with people who are located at too far a distance from the social position occupied by the researcher runs the risk of inadvertently turning participants into objects of study and not independent subjects. For as Bourdieu (1998, p. 608) holds, “asymmetry is reinforced by a social symmetry every time the investigator occupies a higher place in the social hierarchy of different types of capital, cultural capital in particular.” Bourdieu calls this “symbolic violence” (ibid), which would almost certainly interfere with a participatory research paradigm.

Set by a shared ideology that exists in everything we experience (Zizek, 1994) as people with VI, the interviews that comprised data collection of this study presented a forum in which frank, open discussions about social phenomena – both in and out of school – and the discursive practices that shape them ensued. This, as Oliver (2009) contends, is a move toward emancipation, as I attempted to flatten the generally accepted hierarchy of the researcher and participant relationship (Allan, 2008) to try and control the power property that inevitably exists in research.

## **Thus Constituted Subjectivities at School**

Neither the participants nor I explicitly framed our discussions in Foucauldian terms of power relations during fieldwork. However, when provided the opportunity to think about their particular experiences of inclusion, what became apparent to the young people was that having an impairment was negative within the culture of the school. This negative construct rendered them less than the other, normal student, and thus in need of intervention. Consequently, they recognised that they were singled out in the school because of their impaired vision, and that all stakeholders at the school from teachers, administration, other students and even themselves – also acknowledged and thus defined their identities by their differences.

In Foucauldian terms, the power that operated within the school thus individualised the young people. Power of this type “categorizes the individual, marks him [sic] by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him” (Foucault, 1982, p. 781). Within the

school's culture, having VI presented a danger of being further objectivized as inane — far more toxic than the sum of vision impairment. The young people were compelled therefore to measure themselves against normality, which led them to understand that the particular transport options available to them mired their own attempts to be “normal”.

However, through the “self-referential concept of social scientific knowledge” (Baret, 1998, p. 124) that became available to the young people through their participation in this project, they arrived at a new set of conclusions: they began to draw a picture of what inclusive schooling might look like for them, which contained within an overall more open, convivial culture. This change in the young people's understanding of the familiar – inclusive schooling – is what Baret (*ibid*) describes as the “emancipatory potential” of referential knowledge, because it can facilitate them to “liberate themselves from culturally induced constraints.”

## Conclusion

Foucault recognised that pastoral power – a modern form of the powers of the ecclesiastical institution that have spilled out into other facets of society (e.g. education, prisons and the state more broadly) – permit the individualisation of all social members. “Individuals can be integrated, under one condition: that the individual would be shaped in a new form, and submitted to a set of very specific patterns.” (Foucault, 1982, p.783). The Education (General Provisions) Act 2006 legislates that all students must be able to attend and be included in their local schools in Australia. Were this to fully occur for students with disabilities, this would mean that the choices available to them for school placement and the commute could at least widen, along with their social circles. On the surface, this would certainly point to greater inclusive schooling.

However, the example I provide here of young people having to travel long distances to attend a school by transport that highlights their inferiority because of their social ramifications within the student community frames the paradoxical nature of inclusive schooling. Irrespective of the location of a school campus, it is apparent that if students find that the culture of a school is predicated on the dichotomy of normality and abnormality, and that special education provision spontaneously labels learners as second-rate, damage is already done to inclusive schooling. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) suggest, “Social advantages or disadvantages weigh so heavily on educational careers and, more generally, on all cultural life, because, perceived or unperceived, they are always cumulative” (p. 24).

As I have demonstrated in this paper, the transport option that students with VI are compelled to take to school therefore becomes irrelevant, as their subjectivities as special students – as more than the sum of their impairments – are already constituted by association. If, on the other hand, students with VI are able to attend their local neighbourhood schools, and receive the appropriate training to take public transport, their interpretations of their schooling experiences might well be more positive.

Yet inclusive education research has been disinclined to take a critical line against the patterning of the disabled subject. Rather, the professional position it takes is ignorant to conversion, leading it to accept the deficit model as ordinary. The proposition of research in this way is to therefore fail inclusion, rather than to restore it.

A trans-identity research alliance can reveal institutional repression, and make some gains as Slee (2011) proposes to restore inclusive education onto a path of social justice. Moreover, as I have mapped both pragmatically and theoretically in this paper, conversations about collective experience provide a vehicle through which referential knowledge about taken-

for-granted assumptions of structural barriers can be analysed. Moreover, a small critical case (Ball, 2006) such as the one introduced in this paper can provide a useful example of the dangers of special educational needs being over catered to in the pursuit for inclusion. Instead of including, the cultural position adopted by all members of a school (and indeed those outside them) can inadvertently lead to institutional discrimination (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Slee, 2011). Once discovered, it becomes appropriate to work to rid schools of this burden.

## References

- Ainscow, M. (2005). Developing inclusive education systems: What are the levers for change? *Journal of Educational Change*, 6, 109-124.
- Allan, J. (2008). *Rethinking Inclusive Education: The Philosophers of Difference in Practice*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Allan, J. (2010). The sociology of disability and the struggle for inclusive education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 31(5), 603-619.
- Australian Blindness Forum. (2008). *Improving life for people who are blind or vision impaired: Education and children's service*. Retrieved February 22 2013, from: <http://www.australianblindnessforum.org.au/Policy/ABF%20Education%20Childrens%20Service%20policy%20final%20230408.doc>.
- Ball, S. J. (2006). *Education Policy and Social Class: The selected works of Stephen J. Ball*. New York, London: Routledge.
- Baret, P. (1998) Foucault's History of the Present as Self-referential Knowledge Acquisition. *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 24(6), 111—126.
- Barton, L. (2005). Emancipatory research and disabled people: Some observations and questions. *Educational Review*, 57(3), 317-327.
- Biesta, G., Allan J., & Edwards, R. (2011) The theory question in research capacity building in education: Towards an agenda for research and practice. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 59(3), 225-239.
- Booth, T., & Ainscow, M. (2011). *Index for Inclusion: Developing Learning and Participation in Schools* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Bristol: CSIE.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998). Understanding. In P. Bourdieu (Ed.), *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (pp. 607-627). Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1979). *The inheritors: French students and their relation to culture*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC: Sage.
- Charmaz, K. (2011). Grounded theory methods in social justice research. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 359-380). Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC: Sage.
- Clarke, A. E. (2005). *Situational analysis: grounded theory after the postmodern turn*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Davis, L. J. (2010). Constructing Normalcy. In L. J. Davis (ed.), *The Disability Studies Reader* (3rd ed., pp. 3-19). New York, London: Routledge.
- Devlin, R., & Pothier, D. (2006). Introduction: Toward a critical theory of dis-citizenship. In D. Pothier, & R. Devlin (Eds.), *Critical Disability Theory: Essays in Philosophy, Politics, Policy, and Law* (pp. 1-24). British Columbia: UBC Press.
- Education Queensland. (2007). *Special education programs*. Retrieved October 8, 2012, from <http://education.qld.gov.au/studentsservices/learning/disability/parentguide/programs-and-services/programs/index.html>
- Education Queensland. (2008). *School transport assistance programs for students with disabilities*. Retrieved October 8, 2010, from <http://education.qld.gov.au/strategic/eppr/students/smspr009/>

- Education (General Provisions) Act 2006*. Retrieved October 7 2010, from <http://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/LEGISLTN/ACTS/2006/06AC039.pdf>
- Ferri, B. A. (2009). Doing a (Dis)Service: Reimagining Special Education from a Disability Studies Perspective. In W. Ayers, T. Quinn, & D. Stovall (Eds.), *Handbook of Social Justice in Education* (pp. 417-430). New York: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Hammondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry*, 8, 777-795.
- Foucault, M. (1988). The masked philosopher. In L. D. Kritzman (Ed.), *Michael Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture. Interviews and Other Writings* (p. 323). London: Routledge.
- Goodley, D. (2011). *Disability Studies: an Interdisciplinary Introduction*. London: Sage.
- Gough, N. (2010). Performing imaginative inquiry: narrative experiments and Rhizosemiotic play. In T. W. Nielsen, R. Fitzgerald, & M. Fettes (Eds.), *Imagination in Educational Theory and Practice: A Many-sided Vision* (pp. 42-60). Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Graham, L. J., & Slee, R. (2008). An Illusory Interiority: Interrogating the discourse/s of inclusion. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 40(2), 277-293.
- Hatlen, P. (1996). The core curriculum for blind and visually impaired students, including those with additional disabilities. *RE:view*, 28, 25-32.
- Hodkinson, A. (2010). Inclusive and special education in the English educational system: Historical perspectives, recent developments and future challenges. *British Journal of Special Education*, 37(2), 61-67.
- Hodkinson, A. (2012a). Illusionary inclusion – what went wrong with New Labour’s landmark educational policy? *British Journal of Special Education*, 39(1), 5-11.
- Hodkinson, A. (2012b). All present and correct?’ Exclusionary inclusion within the English educational system. *Disability and Society*, 27(5), 675-688.
- Lincoln, Y. S., Lynham, S. A., & Guba, E. G. (2011). Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences, Revisited. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 97-128). Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC: Sage.
- McWilliam, E. (2003). Writing Up, Writing Down: Authenticity & Irony in Educational Research. In M. Tamboukou, & S. J. Ball, (Eds.), *Dangerous Encounters: Genealogy & Ethnography*, (pp. 57-67). New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.
- Meekosha, H., & Shuttleworth, R. (2009). What’s so ‘critical’ about critical disability studies? *Australian Journal of Human Rights*, 15(1), 47-76.
- Mertens, D. M., Sullivan, M., & Stace, H. (2011). Disability communities: Transformative research for social justice. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (4th ed., (pp. 227-242). Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC: Sage.
- Moss, J. (2012) Curriculum, visibility and educational research. ROSE Professorial Lecture Series Julianne Moss, Deakin University June 4, 2012
- Oliver, M. (2009). *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice 2<sup>nd</sup> ed*). Palgrave: Macmillan Press.
- Oliver, M., & Barnes, C. (2012). *The New Politics of Disablement*. Basingstoke: palgrave macmillan.

- Slee, R. (1996). Inclusive schooling in Australia? Not yet. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 26(1), 19-32.
- Slee, R. (2011). *The Irregular School: Exclusion, Schooling and Inclusive Education*. London: Routledge.
- Strauss, A. C., & Corbin, J. M. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Whitburn, B. (2013a). The Dissection of Paraprofessional Support in Inclusive Education: 'You're in Mainstream With a Chaperone'. *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, advanced online publication. doi:10.1017/jse.2013.12.
- Whitburn, B. (2013b). Accessibility and autonomy preconditions to "our" inclusion: A grounded theory study of the experiences of secondary students with vision impairment. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*. Advanced Online publication. DOI: 10.1111/1471-3802.12014.
- Whitburn, B. (2013c). The indelible ink of the special stamp: An insider's research essay on imprints and erasures. *Disability and Society*. *Manuscript accepted for publication 3 September 2013*.
- Youdell, D. (2006). *Impossible Bodies, Impossible Selves: Exclusions and Student Subjectivities*. Dordrecht: Springer.