
The Inclusion Research Network

Since the Labour government launched its Social Exclusion Unit in 1997, many projects and services have begun to include 'promoting social inclusion' amongst their goals. Unfortunately, it is a great deal easier to write these words into a funding proposal than it is to collect satisfactory evidence to show that the project is meeting this target.

So what do we mean by inclusion? Elsewhere [1] I have suggested that it consists of three interlinked aspects:

Access

Is your project dominated by white people, men, or people of a certain age? Do all those who need to have the opportunity to attend? Are decisions made in the office, or does everyone have access to the decision-making process? Are paid jobs open to people who have used the service?

Standard of living

Does your project support people to obtain a job, a pleasant home in a decent neighbourhood and congenial friends and leisure pursuits? Are civil rights upheld?

Relationships

Do people who use your project garden 'shoulder to shoulder' with other members of the community, or are they in a segregated place where they only meet each other? There are a variety of ways in which therapeutic horticulture projects might promote relationships with others in the community. [Bates, P *GrowthPoint* (2000)]

Network meetings

Over the past three years, I have been coordinating an occasional open meeting, the Inclusion Research Network, to discuss how we might evaluate inclusion. Thrive kindly hosted the meeting in October 2002 and this short report introduces some of the work that the group has been involved in.

We always begin meetings with a round-the-table introduction session that can take an hour or more. Between 15 and 40 people attend the meetings, representing learning disability and mental health services, self-advocates and family carers, supported employment and day centres, gardening and forestry, services for disabled adults and children with high support needs, university researchers and local volunteer bureaux. ▶

- ▶ It is a real mix, so everyone has to work hard to explain their own point of view. Acronyms are banned! The meeting is a valuable place for making connections.

During the October meeting, a presentation was given by Roger Steel who leads the Consumers in NHS Research Support Unit. Roger explained how, right across the health and social care sector, researchers are increasingly involving people who use those services in the design, data capture, analysis and dissemination stages of research.

We then had a challenging discussion about the degree to which the research process should be controlled by service users or by academics, and the extent to which research funding favours so-called 'scientific' research methods over participative approaches - such as making a video. It reminded everyone that even a simple action such as designing a questionnaire is laden with issues of power and control.

Research and survey instruments

The second part of the day was spent doing some further work on our catalogue of research and survey instruments. Almost every member of the group has agreed to review one or two instruments against a standard form, and so we are gradually building up an archive of available measures.

This will help local projects who wish to select a suitable instrument to evaluate the aspect of inclusion that is relevant to their work. This project has already contributed to the modernisation programme for learning disability day services (through the Valuing People Implementation Support Team) and to the social inclusion and equalities agenda at the National Institute for Mental Health in England.

In 2003, the Inclusion Research Network will continue to develop the catalogue of inclusion measures and also contribute to a mapping exercise that will identify inclusive services. So if you are:

- running therapeutic horticultural projects that support people to engage in roles and relationships alongside other members of the community
- already using a measure of social inclusion that you could share with us
- willing to review an inclusion measure or survey against the standard form
- interested in attending network meetings...
... please contact me.

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References:

I. Bates P ed (2002) Working for Inclusion. Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health, London.

'Social inclusion' is an important goal for projects. It means everybody having a say in how their project is run. Project users should be equal with other people in their community. The Inclusion Research Network runs meetings and helps with research to find the problems and make sure everyone is included.

Correction

Growing with plants - developing a gardening activity programme for disabled older people, *GrowthPoint* 91, Autumn 2002; the author credit was incorrectly given. The author is Achinoam Ben-Akiva Meliniak, the Coordinator of the Gardening Activity Programme at JDC-ESHEL, Jerusalem, Israel. Sarah Shiffman was the contact person. Our apologies and thanks to Achinoam and to Sarah.