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# Awaiting further consideration

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## Abstract

School exclusion is a relatively rare occurrence, but there is a disproportionate over-representation of students with special educational needs (SEN) being excluded from mainstream classrooms, both formally and through hidden practices. Venturing from the classroom into the world of educational research for my doctoral study, I came across further potentially exclusionary practices as questions were raised about the capacity of students labelled as SEN to provide voluntary informed consent. In my contribution to this special issue, I use poetry to reflect on ethical issues in my study and the need to challenge perceptions of the vulnerable in order to fight for their rights to be heard and participate equitably in all aspects of society.

## Keywords

poetry, ethical approval, educational research, research in special education, perceptions of the vulnerable, exclusion

During the twilight years of my teaching career, I embarked upon a professional doctorate programme (EdD). Throughout the programme, I continued teaching full-time. I was working with students identified as having special educational needs (SEN) who had been excluded from mainstream schools, where it was common practice for female teachers to be referred by students to as ‘Miss’.

The doctoral research I had planned involved a mixed-gender class of students aged between 14 and 17. It was a small class of 10 students that I taught on a regular basis. Due to having been classified by the mainstream school system as having SEN, these students were considered vulnerable by the institutional ethics review panel, and their capacity to give informed consent was questioned. This poem reflects my experiences at the start of the thesis, when I felt I was battling with the institutional ethics board. The poem reflects the to-ing and fro-ing involved in negotiating the uncertainties of the ethical

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approval process and my felt need for the students to be enabled to make voluntary informed decisions about their own involvement in the research.

The use of poetry enables the expression of the emotional aspects of personal experiences. This poem captures something of my own feelings as I waited for and negotiated ethical approval for my doctoral thesis, where I used poetic transcription of my interviews with the participants to access and analyse their experiences of being made to feel 'other', and to convey the cacophony of confusion in their responses to being excluded.

## **Awaiting further consideration**

Well  
 Who am I writing about ethics  
 Well  
 This is who I am writing about ethics

A newcomer  
 An alien  
 Looking in from afar  
 A teacher but also a researcher  
 Passionate to know more

A teacher researcher  
 Tiptoeing into a new world  
 An alien world  
 A world of waiting  
 For committees and approval

Induction completed  
 Plans submitted  
 Ethics forms submitted  
 A time in limbo  
 Frustration  
 Awaiting ethical approval

But now I'm thwarted  
 My students deemed vulnerable  
 In this alien world  
 This Ethics Committee requiring  
 Further information

I'm unprepared  
Unprepared for seemingly endless waiting  
It is my conundrum  
To prove their capacity  
To refuse  
To say 'I'm not participating'

In my world of the excluded  
There is no time to stop and wait  
This unruly mass  
Flung together  
Known as the difficult class

How to show what they are like  
This difficult class  
Their capacity to say no  
Especially considering  
They even told Ofsted to take a hike!

Ethics permeate both worlds  
Codes of practices  
Assessing risks  
Guidelines for safeguarding  
All aimed at  
Protecting children

This class  
The difficult class  
They want to know  
Why I study

I talk  
We talk  
We talk a lot  
About  
My trials and tribulations

They sowed the seeds  
A potential project  
To understand  
Their pathways to exclusion  
But more  
Incorporating poetic transcription

Discussing the dangers  
Of uncovering past trauma  
This fear is real  
Articulated clearly by a quiet voice  
Articulating his fear  
Fear is sharing his past ordeal

Miss, the memories  
Miss, the memories  
I hate the memories of that place  
Those memories too painful to share  
I wouldn't want to participate  
It would be too much to bear

This quiet one's articulation  
Could it just open up  
A pathway to participation  
The others excluded from education  
But now maybe not from the conversation


I am now an agent  
Fighting for the silenced  
Fighting for their rights  
Their rights to be heard

Excluded  
Vulnerable  
But also highly capable

But now  
Awaiting further consideration  
Time passes  
A time in limbo  
Time passes  
Months of mounting frustration

Then...  
The email arrived  
Relief  
Research proposal finally accepted  
Ethical approval granted  
Voices of the vulnerable finally included  
A new chapter begins  
New challenges await  
My research journey  
Just passed through the starting gate

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**Author biography**

**Jane Dickson** is a philosopher. Her research interests are in the field of social inclusion in particular the impact of exclusion. She experiments in creative ways of presenting data, in the form of poems. Now retired from education, her current passion involves the creation of poetic walks.