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Building inclusive and accessible practices into your fieldwork: reflections from workshops with fieldwork educators

Dr Naomi Holmes and Dr Lynda Yorke

Abstract

Fieldwork can pose significant challenges in terms of inclusivity and accessibility, impacting students' experiences, and potentially impacting their future career choices. Here we reflect on data collected from participatory workshops where educators discussed challenges and shared good practice aimed at supporting the planning of more inclusive and accessible fieldwork.

Introduction and context

Fieldwork is a staple of geography education - taking students into the field, where they can experience and engage with the environments discussed in the classroom, is considered an essential activity. However, there are numerous challenges associated with fieldwork faced by students and staff, including, but not restricted to, (often multiple) reasons associated with (dis-)ability, neurodiversity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion or belief, ethnicity, socio-economic status, caring responsibilities, mental health, health and fitness, for example, that until very recently were not considered beyond whether a student can or cannot attend the field trip. A few examples of potential challenges are provided in Table 1, please note this list is not exhaustive. The activity, methods used, location, environment and timing can all impact on how accessible and inclusive fieldwork is for an individual. The COVID pandemic shifted thinking about fieldwork and its delivery, with broader recognition that there are alternative approaches to solely in-person fieldwork. This led to the wider realisation that fieldwork could be delivered in ways that included everyone, and pushed issues around fieldwork and equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) to the forefront of many discussions around fieldwork teaching. Addressing fieldwork and getting it right in terms of EDI matters because we want the next generation of geographers to reflect the diversity of the population.

Table 1: A few examples of potential challenges associated with fieldwork which may be faced by students and staff. Table developed from information in Buckley et al. (2021), Lang (2022) and Maddison and Thurston (2022), and from discussions during participatory workshops facilitated by the authors and attended by geography teachers and fieldwork educators.

Area	Example challenges / barriers to fieldwork participation
Disability	Site access; activities; environmental challenges; appropriate accommodation; safety equipment
Neurodiversity	Change to routine; new environments; dietary; clothing / safety equipment; sensory challenges
Gender	Access to toilets; sleeping arrangements; ill-fitting safety equipment / clothing; lack of accommodations for menstruation
Gender identity	Access to toilet facilities; sleeping arrangements; unsafe areas / countries / local safety; transphobia
Sexual orientation	Homophobia; unsafe areas / countries with some sexualities not being accepted / criminalised; sleeping arrangements
Religion or belief	Opportunity to pray; clothing requirements; fasting; dietary requirement; religious holidays / celebrations
Ethnicity	Clothing requirements; safety equipment; lack of racial and ethnic diversity in geography / the outdoors
Socio-economic	Cost to attend fieldwork; cost of footwear / clothing / equipment; lack of confidence in / experience of 'being outdoors'

Caring responsibilities	Unable to be away from home overnight; financial difficulties
Mental health	Removal from support structures; sharing rooms; eating with others; new environments / activities; change to routine; interpersonal relationships
Health and fitness	Long days; challenging environments; lack of access to hygiene facilities; medical equipment / medicine storage

Previous work by others, for example by Lang (2022, Supporting autistic students with fieldwork) and Maddison and Thurston (2022, Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of learners during residential fieldwork), has provided excellent resources and discussion around specific topics. Here we take a broader focus around inclusivity and accessibility, reflecting on conversations and survey data from several participatory workshops on 'Building inclusivity and accessibility into your fieldwork' that the authors facilitated. These aimed to enable the sharing of good practice between participants (geography teachers and fieldwork educators), with the facilitators providing the focus and structure for the discussion. In this article we think about how, in the words of some of the workshop participants, our fieldwork plans can help to ensure that *'everyone is involved'*, that it is *'accessible to all learners'*, that we *'meet our students' needs'* and *'allow for difference'* and that fieldwork is *'enjoyable for all'*. Recognising that there is often limited training for fieldwork teaching we hope this work will support those involved in delivering fieldwork to increase their awareness of inclusive and accessible fieldwork, both in regards to thinking about wider challenges and issues that might be experienced by some students (and staff), and through increased confidence in the planning and delivery of fieldwork that might help to remove or overcome some of these challenges. Anticipatory design - planning our fieldwork to be as inclusive and accessible as we can from the start (acknowledging that we will likely need to make additional adjustments for individuals) - is essential.

Participant reflections on fieldwork inclusivity and accessibility

To start the workshops we asked participants to anonymously contribute words that they associate with inclusivity and accessibility in fieldwork in their educational setting. There were a wide range of responses (Figure 1) but the most frequent responses included words associated with preparing for fieldwork (e.g., *'planning'*, *'time'*, *'risk assessment'*, *'schedule'*, *'toilets'* and *'budget'*) as well as a focus on the delivery of the fieldwork educational experience (e.g., *'everyone'*, *'safety'*, *'fun'* and *'participation'*). These will be recognised as being essential to good fieldwork planning and delivery anyway; but it is important that these are considered specifically from an inclusivity and accessibility perspective. The responses detail a wide range of considerations for those planning and teaching fieldwork.



Figure 1. Participants' responses to the prompt 'which words do you associate with inclusivity and accessibility in fieldwork in your educational setting'?

We then asked the participants of two workshops for their response to the following statement: 'currently at my school / setting fieldwork is inclusive'. The responses were mostly in agreement with the statement (see Figure 2) with 25 out of 31 respondents responding with *somewhat agree* (22) or *strongly agree* (3). Three responded with *somewhat disagree*, and three with *neither agree nor disagree*.

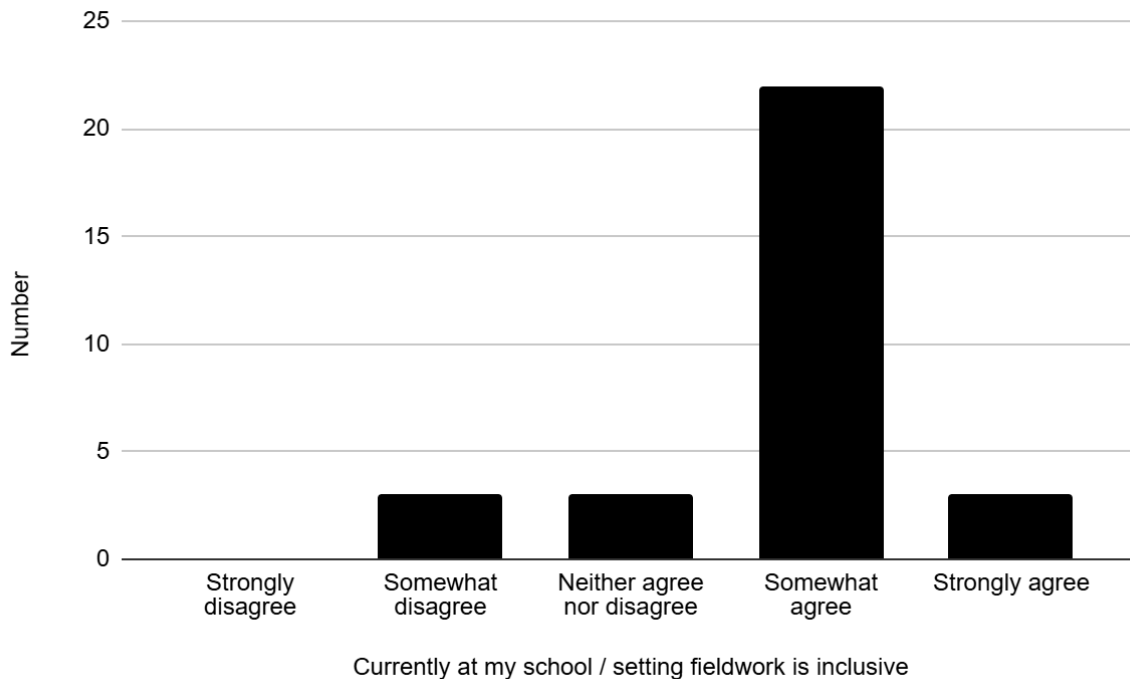


Figure 2. Responses to the statement 'Currently at my school / setting fieldwork is inclusive'.

At one workshop the participants were asked 'To the best of your knowledge have any of the following been barriers to fully taking part in geography fieldwork for your students?' Responses (from 19 participants) can be seen in Figure 3.

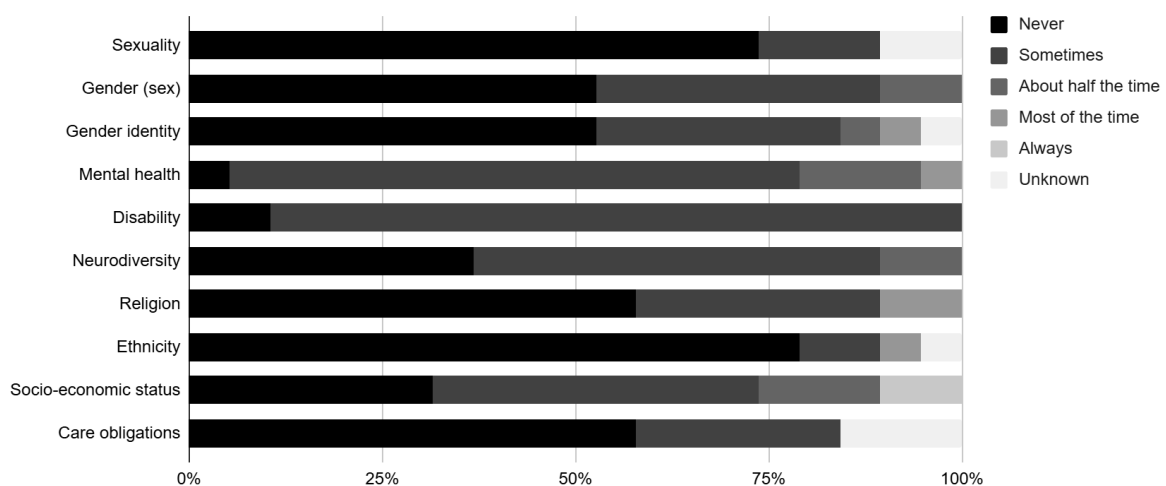


Figure 3. Responses to the question 'to the best of your knowledge have any of the following been barriers to fully taking part in geography fieldwork for your students?'

Across all the reasons the 'never' category represented a mean of 46% of the responses, with the highest values recorded for ethnicity (78%) and sexuality (74%). Mental health (95%) and disability (90%) were the two reasons which most educators reported had prevented their

students from fully taking part in geography fieldwork, the next most reported was socio-economic status (68%). The only reason which was selected by some educators (10%) as always being a barrier was socio-economic status.

We were surprised to see some of the responses presented here, particularly the 'never' responses. Within university groups we have taken on fieldwork we frequently work with students who have found fieldwork participation challenging due to some or multiple of the reasons presented in Figure 3, and there is an ever-increasing body of literature published around this topic which support our experiences and observations. Increasing awareness of the challenges of fieldwork to participants has led to some positive action in university geography fieldwork teaching within recent years, with the RGS-IBG (who accredit many university geography courses) providing guidance around the importance of careful planning for inclusive and accessible fieldwork (Box 1).

Box 1. Guidance from the RGS-IBG (2020) relating to fieldwork planning for inclusive and accessible fieldwork

The **fourth fieldwork principle developed by the RGS-IBG (2020)** '*Accessible and inclusive fieldwork*' states that '*fieldwork should be planned and conducted in such a way as to be as inclusive and accessible as possible, considering the wellbeing of students and staff, including their mental and physical health, and all other protected characteristics. Fieldwork options should be fair and appropriate and, to the extent possible, overcome possible costs and other barriers that might impact a student's ability to participate (e.g. through caring responsibilities). An Equality Impact Assessment should be undertaken on all fieldwork – with attention to both students and staff – and the results published to students.*'

This statement (Box 1), alongside an increasing range of articles and resources aimed at supporting educators, has increased awareness of, supported conversations, and started to drive positive change around improving inclusivity and accessibility in geography fieldwork (with shifts towards proactive planning and anticipatory design rather than only reactive actions which rely heavily on students disclosing their needs), however this is still much to be improved. The data presented in Figure 3 support the importance of anticipatory design for fieldwork inclusivity and accessibility, acknowledging that through thoughtful planning we can remove many (but not all) of these challenges - especially important when we might be unaware of the reasons that might cause challenges for individuals.

Considerations for planning inclusive and accessible fieldwork

There are various steps that can be taken to develop and deliver more inclusive, accessible, and equitable fieldwork (see for example, GA, 2024, RGS-IBG, 2020, Yorke et al., 2022, 2024 for some guidance) but when doing so you need to be attentive to your own positionality (for example, your own characteristics, identity, experiences, views, perspectives) and to your students' (and staff) needs. To take this forward in your own educational setting you might start by reflecting on how you / your team approach fieldwork. Figure 4 presents some of the questions or points

that were raised by educators during the workshops - it might help you / your team to reflect on these as you work towards implementing an effective anticipatory design approach towards more inclusive and accessible fieldwork. We found that supporting these discussions with an inclusive fieldwork checklist / framework (such as that developed by undergraduate students at Sheffield Hallam University during the student-staff research project 'Developing a Justice, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion checklist for inclusive fieldtrips (Buckley et al., 2021)) enables broader reflection on the topic. This checklist (which was used in the participatory workshops) introduced several areas to think about when planning fieldwork, and for each of these areas provided some points for consideration. Feedback from workshop participants was that this was useful to support their discussions and reflections around inclusive and accessible fieldwork, and that something like this could help staff when planning fieldwork. It is also important to communicate with those taking part in the fieldwork. Speaking with your students - finding out more about their needs - and then involving them in the planning of the fieldwork activity/ies (e.g., Rackley, 2017, RGS-IBG, n.d.) can help with increasing engagement and participation, as well as the learning associated with the fieldwork.

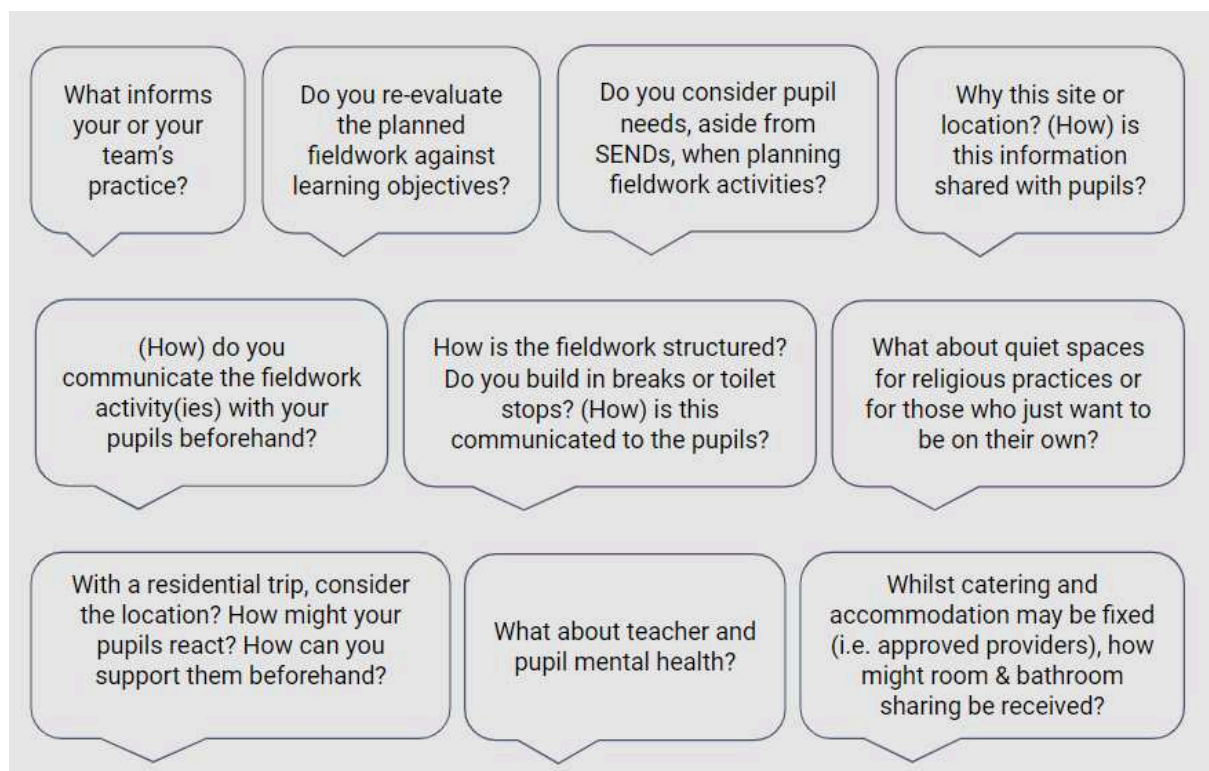


Figure 4. Example reflection / discussion points raised by educators during the workshops

Reviewing your approach(es) for inclusive and accessible fieldwork

Following attendance at one of the workshops, one participant reflected that they '*need to be more proactive with considering student needs prior to organising*' and another that they '*want to evaluate current trips through the lenses of students*'. Some of the things to think about when reviewing current fieldwork practice include: when was the last time you considered the why, where, what, and how of a fieldwork activity? and have you thought critically about the format

and delivery, accessibility and inclusion factors, considering alternative approaches or potential new locations where necessary? It is important to start by thinking about the learning objectives, the participants and the practical considerations (i.e., risk assessment, costs, timings, equipment), before undertaking an accessibility and inclusion audit / equality impact assessment of each planned activity.

This can be done by carrying out an initial review, considering any barriers that might prevent any of your students from being able to fully engage in a fieldwork activity at a specific location. Make sure you take into account all protected characteristics alongside other factors such as socio-economic status and caring responsibilities. The next step is to outline what you can do to mitigate or remove those barriers, while retaining the educational (and other) benefits of the fieldwork. Once you have done this you can make an informed decision on whether your fieldwork activity can (i) go ahead as planned, (ii) go ahead with some adaptations / changes, or (iii) not take place (or not take place without substantial changes). This assessment should be seen as a dynamic process, returned to before, during, and after the fieldwork. Involving students in this process will be extremely beneficial, both to the teachers and trip leaders, and to the students themselves. Students will provide different perspectives and may bring up things that the adults have not considered (RGS-IBG, n.d.). The process will also help to increase student's awareness of themselves, other people, and the environment (RGS-IBG, n.d.)

What you can do now

It can be difficult to make changes, particularly given time and financial constraints, and other pressures on the educational system. One participant mentioned the challenges of offering *'100% inclusivity / accessibility - while ensuring we fulfil our statutory requirements'* and the potential of *'lowering Ofsted's quality of education during a deep dive if we cannot offer fieldwork to all'*. There are, however, small actions that can be taken that will help contribute to improved inclusivity and accessibility of geography fieldwork, contributing to greater diversity within the discipline and enabling more students to gain from the range of educational and broader benefits associated with fieldwork. Searl (2024) provides a range of ideas that can help you with this and Figure 5 shows some of the suggestions shared by educators at the participatory workshops. The overriding feedback that came from workshop participants was that having some time and space *'to share ideas with others was invaluable'*.

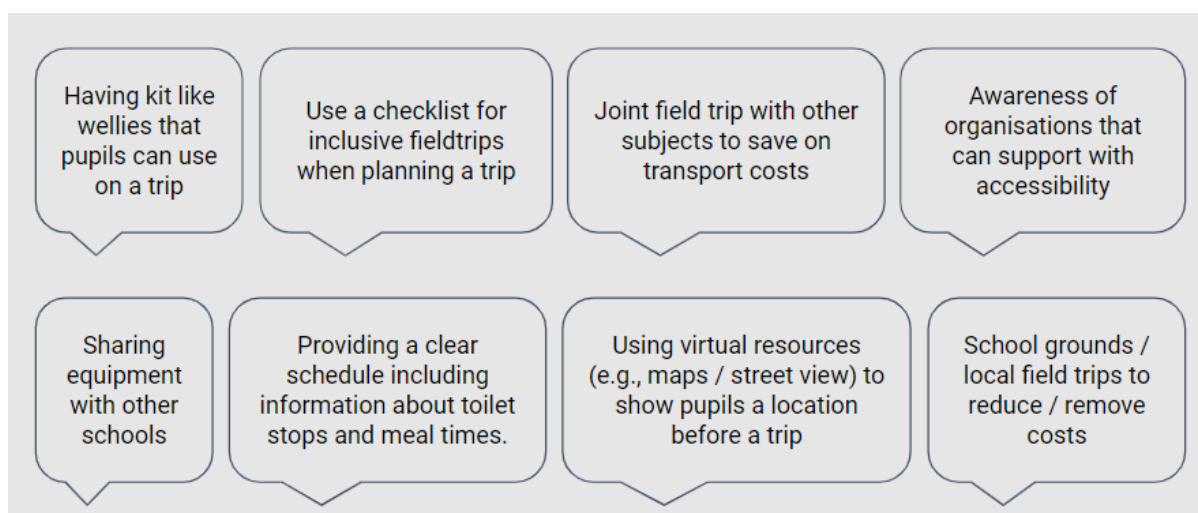


Figure 5. Ideas / practices shared by geography fieldwork educators during the workshops

Thinking about the current academic year, challenge yourself to take one action for your next fieldwork activity. Looking ahead to the following school year, ask yourself what feasibly could be changed to make geography fieldwork more inclusive and accessible for all participants?

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Ethical approval

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