

ISSUES OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Abstract

Inclusive education seeks to reduce exclusion from and within schools, and to secure participation and learning success for all. It aims to strengthen the capacity of the education system to reach out to all children; learning should be based on the clear understanding that learners are individuals with diverse characteristics and backgrounds. Despite the emphasis on inclusive education, many challenges face its implementation which creates challenges for learners with individual differences. This paper focuses on policy, theory and practice in relation to curriculum content, instructional process and set standards among others.

Introduction

The global emphasis on knowledge economy has necessitated competitive reforms in education to increase efficiency of the school system and also to comply with the market place principles in education (Ball, 2006). To ensure that no child is disadvantaged, main stream reform legislation has been enacted by many countries to develop their special education system or to encourage greater inclusion of children considered to have disabilities or learning difficulties. Such a policy has implications on the role of the teacher and learning institutions, the curriculum and teacher education programmes. Dealing with differences and diversity of learners continues to be one of the biggest challenges faced by learning institutions across many countries (European Agency on the Development of Special Education, 2006).

Education is understood as a tool that can be used to reduce poverty, to improve the lives of individuals and groups, and to transform societies (Grubb and Lazerson, 2004). Providing an inclusive education to all is necessary because it is linked to human, economic, and social development goals. Failure of any education system to provide an education for all children not only leads to an educational underclass, but also a social and economic underclass which has serious consequences for society now and in the future. Evans and Lunt (2012) observe that the implementation of inclusive education policies has been uneven globally. Many reasons are associated with these disparities; limited funding, and resources, competing policies that stress the achievement of set standards among others. Additionally, it has been suggested that one of the greatest barriers to the

development of inclusion is because teachers do not have the required competencies (knowledge, skills and attitudes) to implement policies on inclusive education.

Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is the process of strengthening the capacity of education system to reach out to all learners as a strategy to achieve education for all. The world Declaration on Education for All adopted in Jomtien Thailand (1990), set out as an overall vision: Universalizing access to education for all children, youth, adults and promoting equality. This means being proactive in identifying the barriers that may be countered in accessing educational opportunities and identifying the resources needed to overcome these barriers. Inclusive moves emphasis away from pupils for whom curriculum is modified towards the process of responding to all pupils, acknowledging that any child could have additional support needs at any given time.

Inclusion is about the child's right to participate as fully as possible in school activities and the school's duty to accept and accommodate the child's right, Inclusive education is based on the fundamental human rights. Education is a fundamental human right, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1998). Children with or without disabilities have the same rights to educational opportunities under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child. Inclusion recognizes the right of all learners including those with learning difficulties. Inclusion therefore means that students with special needs met in a mainstream education system that embraces a wide diversity of learners. Inclusion should thus be seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diverse needs of all children, youth, and adults through increasing participation in learning cultures, and communities, and reducing and eliminating exclusion within and from education.

It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies with a common vision that covers all children in the regular school system. Article 24 of the convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted in 2006 advocate for inclusive education which forms the bases for development of inclusive education policies and approaches. Barriers to inclusion can be reduced through active collaboration between pool makers, education personnel and other stakeholders including the active involvement of members of the local community, such as political and political leaders, local education officials and media.

Approaches to Educating Special Needs Children

The UN *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN, 2015) calls for countries to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (Sustainable Development Goal 4). There is no single concept of inclusive education that applies across all contexts. Most fundamentally, inclusive education is considered to be the "least restrictive environment" for children with disabilities (Hayes and Bulat, 2017). As such, it is the preferred educational setting, as specified in Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

Mitchell (2015) explains that at its most basic, inclusive education means educating learners with special educational needs in regular education settings. Some organisations and countries have used a broader definition of inclusion that includes the education of all individuals who may be marginalised for an overview of how the concept of inclusive education is presented in academic literature and international organisations/networks). Mitchell (2015) argues that inclusive education is a multifaceted concept that requires educators at all levels of their systems to attend to vision, placement, curriculum, assessment, teaching, acceptance, access, support, resources and leadership. It is no longer appropriate for policy-makers and researchers to define inclusive education solely, or even primarily, in terms of placement. The aim of inclusive learning is to move beyond simply focusing on 'access', to understanding ways of increasing active participation and engagement in learning. Achieving the optimum level of participation of all girls and boys, and introducing gender-sensitive and learner-centred approaches to suit diverse learning styles, has implications for the way schools are organised, such as: curriculum change; teaching, learning and assessment adjustments; and a shift in emphasis of school leadership. Inclusive learning moves beyond providing individuals with support to fundamental changes being made to the way teaching and learning is organised. Inclusive learning can be seen as 'a principled approach to education' (Ainscow & Miles, 2008) which involves:

- a) the process of increasing the participation of students in, and reducing their exclusion from, the curricula, cultures and communities of local schools
- b) restructuring the cultures, policies and practices in schools so that they respond to the diversity of students in their locality
- c) the presence, participation and achievement of all students vulnerable to exclusionary pressures, not only those with impairments or those who are categorised as 'having special educational needs' (Ainscow & Miles, 2008).

In summary, inclusive learning is concerned with a significant proportion of learners who experience educational difficulties and who subsequently fail and drop out of school. In developed countries, the percentage of children in mainstream schools who have, at some point, been identified as having difficulties in learning (often referred to as 'special educational needs'),

Segregation versus Inclusion

Children tend to be either seen as 'normal', with common characteristics, and so educated in a mainstream school; or 'special' because of their particular individual or group characteristics, and educated in a special school, or in a specialist unit attached to a mainstream school ,alternatively, all learners are seen as having a common educational aim, and so the quality of teaching and learning is regarded as the main priority, with additional support being provided, where necessary, as part of an inclusive learning approach.

The most appropriate location for the education of children with disabilities are influenced by culturally defined and evolving concepts and by the availability of educational options, but in many countries there is only one option – that of attending the

local school. Alternative options, where available, include special, residential or day schools, resource rooms or special units, specialist support from a visiting itinerant teacher, and home-based education (sometimes in preparation for formal education), supported by community-based rehabilitation (CBR) workers. Many countries are moving away from segregated education systems and towards a more inclusive model that allows for students with disabilities to be taught alongside their regular peers, but progress has been uneven (Hayes and Bulat, 2017).

Kuper, Saran and White (2018) highlight that different approaches are used to improve the educational outcomes of children with disabilities in different countries. Traditionally, special schools and special classes have been provided, including in lower- and middle-income countries, involving the segregation of children with disabilities.

In recent decades, the move has been towards inclusive schools, where children with disabilities are supported to attend mainstream schools. Many interventions to improve educational outcomes for people with disabilities include elements from both approaches (segregation and inclusion) (Kuper et al, 2018).

No standardized approach for how to shift from a segregated system to an inclusive one is available. Issues such as a country's current education system, cultural views on disability, political will, and socioeconomic stability can impact how a country may choose to approach its inclusive educational reform. Hayes and Bulat (2017) highlight several models that have been helpful for different countries as they work toward developing an inclusive education system (e.g. developing resource centres; using itinerant teachers/specialist teachers; engaging teaching assistants; moving from a diagnosis-based approach to an individualized one).

Kuper et al (2018) argue that the solutions to improving the inclusion of children with special needs in education should address the barriers operating at different levels, including the system (e.g. policy and legislation), schools (e.g. better teacher training), families (e.g. providing financial support to aid school attendance), and people with disabilities (e.g. improving reading skills). Different approaches are likely to be appropriate for improving educational outcomes in different groups.

Capability Approach as a Framework for Inclusive Education

Inclusive education was seen as a potential remedy for the exclusion of individuals labeled with disabilities from educational environments and, by extension, society in general. Based on this understanding, children labeled with disabilities would attend the same school environment as their peers and receive the same education (Baglieri, Bejoian & Broderick, 2011) Despite being conceptualized as a direct extension of social justice and equity discourses, and despite the rapid global adoption of the "inclusive education agenda," inclusive education has not realized its intended aim of honouring diversity, and welcoming all learners into educational systems (Slee ,2014) While not denying the significance of the inclusive education movement in recognizing and reducing the harmful effects of institutionalized segregation, it is important to recognize that the positive intent of inclusive education's aims do not eliminate the problematic aspects of its practices (Terzi, 2014).

Inclusive education has become synonymous with the practice of mainstreaming: placing students labelled with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. The emphasis on mainstreaming appears to assume that the location, a mainstream classroom, generally resolves the problem of inclusivity, rather than continuing to elaborate comprehensive changes to the structure of mainstream schools and classrooms to enable them to be inclusive contexts, thus inclusive education has been represented as an intervention for specific children, and synonymous to special education, rather than a structure for reframing education and enabling the participation of all learners.

Placement practices targeting children labelled with disabilities are employed under the guise of inclusive education, leading to segregation between students as *those who are targeted by inclusion* and *those who are not targeted by inclusion*, the concept of equity dovetails with acknowledging and respecting individual differences: differences that are intrinsic to an individual, differences that are extrinsic or attributed to environmental and social factors, and differences that focus on the conversion of resources to expanding capabilities and, thereby, obtaining functioning., framed by the Capability Approach,

Terzi (2014) argued that the level of justice in social and institutional arrangements should be evaluated based on their recognition of individual differences, and the extent to which they provide each individual the opportunity to benefit from resources, given his/her choices and individual differences. Education is one of the few fundamental capabilities, essential to human well-being.

In inclusive education, the Capability Approach may be used provisionally to determine the practices that allow for equitable treatment within school systems by providing children the capabilities to accomplish their valued functioning and stressing the principles of well-being and agency.

Reframing Inclusive Education

The model of relational inclusion by (Dalkilic & Vadeboncoeur, 2016) is central to the development of equitable educational practices to equalize learning and well-being, it is an alternative to current practices of inclusive education. Relational Inclusion suggests that inclusive education should both contribute to and be the outcome of an educational system that provides an equitable opportunity to all children to be active agents in their own learning. Relational Inclusion is founded on five core principles that are closely linked to the capabilities of children within the social arrangement of schooling, attending to diversity and agency (Dalkilic & Vadeboncoeur, 2016).

Culture and Context Responsive Inclusive Practices: The principle of culture and context responsive inclusive practices situates inclusive education within the culture and context of the individuals, rather than assuming universal practices can be applied across culture and context. According to this principle, inclusive education practices cannot be defined and universally applied separate from the relationship between a child, educator, and caregiver. Instead, the specifics of the situation at hand must be examined in order to proceed with practices that are regarded as beneficial for all members of the educational community moving away from universal practices is consistent with an approach that

attends to capabilities because individuals have different preferred functions from one another, based in their cultural and contextual values. For that reason, an inclusive education based on the Capability Approach cannot provide a universal *recipe* for practice. The aim of Relational Inclusion is to be mindful of the culture and context in determining which practices will expand on the capabilities of children for them to obtain their valued functionings. In short, practices aimed at adding to children's capabilities to enable them the choice of obtaining valued functionings must be responsive to the culture and context of children and their families.

Holistic Child-focused Inclusive Pedagogy: The principle of holistic child-focused inclusive pedagogy further emphasizes the significance of the relationships between the child and the educator, and states that children's identities should be considered beyond their label of disability. Just as inclusive education practices should not be assumed to be universal, practices should not apply universally to all children who have been given a particular label of disability. In order to have a child-focused inclusive pedagogy, it is crucial to focus on the involved persons and their relationships with one another: the educator, the child labelled with disability, and his/her family. The emphasis on the whole child and the relationships between individuals add further context to practices that become inclusive given the relationships between these participants.

Inclusion as a Spectrum of Practices: The principle of inclusion as a spectrum of practices aims to deconstruct the polar thinking that dominates current discourses of inclusive education. Examples of polarities that frequent the inclusive education literature include classifying practices as inclusive vs. exclusive, and children as typical vs. atypical. Binary perspectives assume environments labelled as inclusive are such under all conditions and for all participants; aspects of such environments that may exclude some children, or children under some conditions, go unassessed. Within Relational Inclusion, the Capability Approach allows for a dynamic assessment of educational practices, as environment or practices are not labelled as being absolutely inclusive or exclusive; rather, they are continuously evaluated and modified for new ways to further expand on capabilities of the children. Diversity in capabilities implies that children have a spectrum of different valued functioning and, thus, require a spectrum of different practices and resources to expand their capabilities. **Inclusion as**

Increasing Participation in Democratic Classrooms and Societies: The principle of inclusion as increasing participation in democratic classrooms and societies identifies a task of inclusive education to be the recognition of diversity and valuing individual contributions and participation as significant for a democratic society. Relational Inclusion condemns the excessive regulation of behaviour and the assimilation of the child to fit the existing structure of the classroom through behavioural modification techniques, instead of defining democracy in education as a practice of welcoming differences and embracing the heterogeneity of contributors to the classroom culture while working together towards educational goals.

This principle implies that children can decide and/or contribute to decisions regarding their well-being, and their view should be incorporated into a social system. The role of individuals—from educators, to parents and children—within a social arrangement is to foster a system that provides the resources for all to expand their chosen capabilities, rather than to create a system that requires everyone to ultimately possess the same capabilities, regardless of the value these capabilities may have for the varied individuals (Taylor, 2013).

Relational Practices: This principle suggests that the frameworks currently dominating education based on individualism are a cause for exclusionary and inequitable practices. A relational ontology, or a relational way of being, insists that educational professionals see themselves and the children and families with whom they work in a web of relationships that are primary and valued as such. For educational professionals to enable relationally inclusive environment, this principle suggests that a change in framework to guide the implementation of inclusive education is necessary, where children are provided with the resources and practices that allow them to obtain their choice of functioning. In a capability driven education system, it will assist children in identifying valued functionings and the role of families in contributing to educational practices via the relationships between educators, children, and parents as central to the practices of inclusive education.

The implications of these principles go beyond the practices implemented within the classroom to include practices that involve children and their families and, further, to include the policies required to support the education of professionals.

Implications for Practice and Policy

According to the educational reform perspective, inclusion is concerned with transforming the education system and schools for all the students, ensuring that their diverse learning needs are catered for, and that they access high quality education (UNESCO, 2004). Therefore, the educational reform perspective of inclusive education recognizes that each student comes to the learning arena with his or her own unique needs and abilities, and that education is supposed to respond effectively to the diversity of *all* the students.

Reframing inclusive education in order to enhance the opportunities for a child to work towards achieving valued and reasonable functioning through practices that are formed relationally may lead to the creation of many different practices. This variation will be an improvement provided that it expands the capabilities of children in achieving their valued and reasonable functioning. The practices of inclusive education that are derived must be observed, interpreted, analyzed, and continually assessed, with input from educators, children, and parents, to ascertain the extent to which children's capabilities are being expanded through this model.

Working towards inclusive education calls for significant changes and modifications in teaching and learning content, approaches, processes, structures and strategies, with a common vision of Education for All (EFA). It is clear that within the educational reform perspective, inclusive education is not a disability movement whose main focus is to fight for the rights of special needs people, but a concern about all the

learners (this includes learners with special needs) being assisted to achieve their fullest potential. According to the educational reform perspective of inclusive education, curricula are the ones that should adapt to the students' learning styles and needs, not the other way round.

Salend (2011) distils from the literature on inclusive education four key principles through which the philosophy of inclusion is put into practice. These are, firstly, providing all learners with challenging, engaging and flexible general education curricula; secondly, embracing diversity and responsiveness to individual strengths and challenges; thirdly, using reflective practices and differentiated instruction; and fourthly, establishing a community based on collaboration among students, teachers, families, other professionals and community agencies. Inclusive education, therefore, aims to provide a facilitative and constructive focus for improving the education of children with special educational needs.

Conclusion

As a process, inclusion implies the following: that it is a never-ending search to find better ways of responding to diversity that it is ongoing, like a journey, rather than a destination or a state; the diversity of students' learning needs, backgrounds, characteristics, abilities, and learning styles make it necessary for educators to treat each case as it comes. There are no set paths or ready-made „quick fix" solutions to follow", which makes inclusion a never-ending search for better and more effective ways of responding to diversity.

Recommendations

- There should be a clear and coherent national policy based on inclusive special education backed up by legislation that clearly specifies the rights of children with special needs and their families.
- There is need to have statutory guidelines provided by the national Ministry of Education, or equivalent, in each country.
- There is need for parent partnership services, or parent involvement co-ordinators, which can provide information and guidance to parents of children with special needs.
- Schools should have policies and practices in place to ensure that the requirements of national legislation and statutory guidelines are implemented.
- The schools should also have procedures in place for identifying and assessing children with special needs and for providing appropriate interventions. They also need to have procedures in place for monitoring and reviewing the progress of children identified as having special needs and for evaluating the effectiveness of interventions used with them
- Teachers must be trained to identify children with special education needs and ensure that the teaching strategies and techniques that they use are based on sound practical guidelines.
- The teachers must also, whenever possible, use evidence-based practices such as co-operative learning and peer tutoring to facilitate the optimal learning of all children, including those with special needs.

- In order for this to become a reality, all teachers must have thorough training in teaching children with special educational needs as part of their initial training, and ongoing professional development relevant to this throughout their career.

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