



Understanding inclusive education: ideals and reality

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ABSTRACT

The key issue discussed in the article is the main challenges in developing inclusive education. Most European countries have acknowledged inclusive education as a means to secure equal educational rights for all persons. However, the definitions and implementations of inclusive education vary immensely. They are discussed in relation to a narrow and a broad definition of inclusive education, distinguishing between a horizontal and a vertical dimension of the concept. The article also goes into students' learning outcomes in inclusive education as well as teacher competencies for inclusive pedagogy. No country has yet succeeded in constructing a school system that lives up to the ideals and intentions of inclusion, as defined by different international organizations. Placement seems to be the most frequent criterion of inclusive education, to avoid segregation. The quality of teaching and learning processes in inclusive education has lower priority.

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Introduction: inclusive ideals and practice

Inclusive education faces challenges connected to ideals and action. If we turn to different international organizations, such as UNICEF, UNESCO, the Council of Europe, the United Nations and the European Union, the definitions of inclusion have several common ideal elements (Hardy and Woodcock 2015; Kiuppis 2011). Inclusion then involves the right to education for all students. The values associated with inclusion have links to interactionist ideology and revolve around fellowship, participation, democratization, benefit, equal access, quality, equity and justice. Inclusion involves fellowship and participation in school culture and curricula for all students (Booth 1996). Since the Salamanca Statement in 1994, most European countries have acknowledged that inclusive education is an important premise to secure equal educational rights for all persons with varied special educational needs.

The practical state of inclusive education in many countries differs widely, between and even within schools. As Allan (2008) has concluded: 'There appears, however, to be deep uncertainty about how to create inclusive environments within schools and about how to teach inclusively' (10). In all countries there seems to be a gap between formulations and realizations of inclusive education. 'If inclusion, for all its complexity, is such an important principle, why is it not a readily identifiable, stand-alone entity in policy? And why is inclusion so often only mentioned in passing in many policies?' (Hardy and Woodcock 2015, 117).

In this article, I will discuss the relationship between inclusion as intention and inclusion as practice by answering the following questions: How is inclusive education understood and practised, and what are the main challenges in developing inclusive education?

An OECD report claims that there is agreement about what inclusive education is, and that the main challenges are a mixture of lack of political will and human beings' endless resistance to change (OECD 1999). I will question these assertions, by discussing definitions of inclusive education, inclusive practices, outcomes of inclusive education and competences for inclusive education as revealed in recent research, with special relevance for European countries. I concentrate my comments on elements of general and overall interest.

Rhetorical masterpiece but lack of consensus

The definition presented in the introduction represents a strong and widely accepted ideal ethical ethos attributed to inclusion. I refer to it as a masterpiece of rhetoric, easy to accept and difficult to be against or even criticize. This illustrates that inclusion is strongly value- and ideology-driven, in the same category as other similar concepts such as democracy and social justice. The ambitions and ideal value aspects of inclusion have few negative positions or limitations (Norwich 2014). The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education supports this notion, when they formulate the challenges explicitly in this way: 'The current debate is no longer about what inclusion is and why it is needed; the key question is how it is to be achieved' (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education 2014a, 5). To get public attention, political statements often have to present their ambitions by promising a lot, as is done in the case of inclusion. This has promoted the selling of the inclusive ideas. The danger is political oversell, such that it is impossible or at best very demanding to fulfil the promises (Cuban 2001). As we will see later, the empirical evidence for inclusion is ambiguous, a possible consequence of promising too much.

In spite of an overriding formal normative consensus, it is not possible to find one universally institutionalized definition of inclusive education. Therefore, it is premature to draw any conclusion about agreement. To the contrary, for a long time there has been a battle about the interpretation of the concept of inclusion (Hansen and Qvortrup 2013). The importance of this contest about its meaning is that definitions both reflect the understanding and affect the practising of the concept and, in turn, how inclusive education meets and treats different groups of students. Different meanings create tensions. To systematize and discuss the differing understandings involved could represent a richness in the development of inclusive education (Florian 2014).

Single- or multiple-oriented

Mitchell (2005b) contrasts inclusion as a single-dominant issue with inclusion as a multiple-oriented matter. In the first case, inclusion refers to one dominant value, idea and practice. This approach creates a dichotomy; you either have inclusion, or you do not. As I will come back to, a frequent issue in this respect has been the placement of students receiving special education.

In the latter case, inclusive education is a product of multiple values and processes. They can either support each other or be in conflict. Mitchell (2005b) rejects a view that relates inclusion to one single-dominant value and practice. He finds considerable ambiguities, confusions and controversies connected with inclusion. Especially characteristic are deep-seated dilemmas, when you have to choose between several unfavourable alternatives. An example of this wider and more elaborated definition is that inclusion, in addition to placement, concerns the conditions for social life and learning in school. Inclusion then is about how the teaching is organized (fellowship and placement), about teacher and student activities (support, involvement and participation), and about benefit from the teaching (Haug 2003).

In the next part, I refer to a model of inclusion that distinguishes between a horizontal dimension and a vertical dimension of the concept. The horizontal dimension involves the general understanding and operationalization of inclusive education. This is the institutionalization of the substantial content of the concept, what inclusion is actually about. The vertical dimension concerns the

coherence between the different political and organizational levels in society and school. The combination of these dimensions creates the basis for understanding and practising inclusion.

The horizontal dimension: the institutionalization of inclusive education

Some aspects of inclusive education have a history that goes back several hundred years (Johnsen 2000). The dominating current use comes from how to organize and teach special education to students with disabilities (Florian 2008), a narrow approach. The alternative wide approach deals with all students in danger of marginalization (Arduin 2015; Thomas 2013).

In a study of research about inclusion, Göransson and Nilholm (2014) identified four levels of definitions, illustrating the narrow and the broad definitions. These results are in agreement with a typology developed by Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2006), Göransson and Nilholm's (2014) first level is a single-oriented issue. The other three are multiple-oriented. The first two categories exemplify the narrow definition of inclusion, and deal only with education for students with disabilities. The lowest level is about the placement of students with disabilities in a general education classroom. Next comes inclusion as meeting the social and/or academic needs of these students. The next two categories deal with the broad definition and concern education for all students. That is, inclusion to meet the social and/or academic needs of all students and, finally, inclusion to create communities.

A narrow definition

The narrow definition of inclusion deals with special education only (Arduin 2015). An analysis of relevant research databases from 2012 concluded that, as expected, the dominant use of the term inclusion was in relation to special education and disability (Norwich 2014). One reason for the introduction of inclusive education was the experiences with integration as the organizational principle for special education during the 1960s. Integration then sustained the dichotomy between ordinary and special education. Contrary to intentions, the practising of integration did not eliminate segregation, marginalization, discrimination or devaluation in mainstream school settings. Integration was mostly a system-level reform, taking for granted that changes in placement would affect the teaching and learning processes in class to the best for the 'integrated students'. This had not happened (Vislie 2003). Inclusion gave more focus on teaching and learning processes, and was supposed to bring about pedagogical changes that integration had not managed (Graham and Jahnukainen 2011). This change from integration to inclusion came first in the USA during the 1970s, and occurred later in Europe.

Inclusion as placement and educational quality

Because of this origin, inclusion in a narrow perspective concerns placement of students receiving special education, about where the teaching is going on and together with whom. The dominating ideal theories of inclusive education state that students with disabilities shall be entitled to full membership in regular classes together with children from the same neighbourhood in local schools. There they should have access to differentiated and individualized support, programmes and assessments. Inclusive education then means to teach all students together in a normal school-class setting, where they all receive teaching that corresponds to their abilities and interests (Anastasiou, Kauffman, and Di Nuovo 2015; Haug 2014). Inclusion introduces a new perspective on the poor educational performances of students. Inclusion contests the established explanation that low achievements in school are a result of students' individual pathological characteristics and weaknesses. In inclusive education, the view is social and relational, that the school system itself contributes to the students' academic failures (Booth and Ainscow 2011; Mitchell 2005b).

The best place for learning defines inclusion

An alternative way to practise the narrow approach is to define inclusive education not as full membership in a mainstream class but as the best place for learning. When deciding where to teach students, Warnock (2005) gives priority to where students experience the highest potential for learning, in combination with a feeling of belonging and well-being. Benefit then becomes superior to fellowship and participation when deciding about placement, which also could be an argument for retaining special schools within an inclusive ideology.

This is a rare standpoint, which represents a segregated discourse of inclusion (Fulcher 1999). It is not in line with the most common definitions and theories. On the other hand, the tension between inclusion as learning opportunities and inclusion as placement in schools for all is a matter of contention (Hansen and Qvortrup 2013; Norwich 2014). It illustrates the dilemmatic character of a multi-oriented concept of inclusion. Dilemmas here could be that students with disabilities taught in ordinary class had less access to specialist services, and that separate settings could result in exclusion and devaluation (Norwich 2008). The inclusive solution is to bring these two alternatives together and combine them. In practice however, the question of *where* often takes priority over *how* the students should be educated. The danger is that access and placement will replace quality and benefit as the focus is on debates and practices of inclusive education, as became the case with integration.

A broad definition

The broad definition of inclusion concerns all students and marginalized groups, not only those with disabilities (Thomas 2013). This is in line with the Salamanca Declaration from 1994, which covers all groups of students in danger of facing problems in school because of diversity (UNESCO 1994). The declaration incorporates all students in danger of segregation and their right to participate in common learning activities within the ordinary school system, regardless of special needs, gender, ethnicity, culture, social background, etc. The idea is that education develops human capital for everyone. Most of the international organizations that have shown interest in inclusive education have adopted this wide approach.

'Education for All' has become an alternative expression. This is a global movement within UNESCO to provide basic education of quality for all (Miles and Singal 2010). This moves inclusion away from the field of disability into the realm of diversity, a terrain that '... now incorporates a more extensive spectrum of concerns and discourses ...' (Thomas 2013, 474), which is far more complex and demanding to practise.

A threat to persons with disability?

Some inclusive theorists worry about the consequences of widening the inclusion territory, and criticize the broad definition. This could be a possible threat not only to inclusive theory but also to inclusive practices. Since the broad definition concerns not only persons with disabilities, there is a risk that the interests of those with disabilities might become secondary or even be overlooked when pursuing other minority interests, for instance related to gender or social class (Norwich 2014). The notion is that governments and international organizations have assimilated and neutralized the concept by adopting it. This formulation within a broader educational policy of regular schooling could contest and obscure inclusion (Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou 2011; Kreitz-Sandberg 2015).

Under the vision of education for all, some countries have actually overlooked the issue of disability, and have not been able to provide education for the most disadvantaged students (Miles and Singal 2010). Based on the value principles behind Education for All and inclusive education, these practices can be questioned. On the other hand, based on the very same principles and values it is also unacceptable not to offer similar conditions for learning and development in school to all students.

The vertical dimension: coherence

In order to fully understand the practices of inclusion, it is imperative to dwell upon the role of coherence. Coherence means that the different educational systems and parts of these systems are connected and consistent with relation to inclusion (Ferguson 2008). The expectation is that all levels of the educational systems and the systems' environment support and promote the intentions and practices of inclusive education whatever they are, from top national policy, to teachers' teaching and students' experiences and learning. Then the different parts and levels would support each other, and improve the chances of achieving the ambitious objectives.

Lack of consistency weakens the policy. This applies regardless of the definition of inclusive education. 'Respect for difference can only be cultivated in educational systems if those responsible for enacting educational practices are supported by consistent and coherent policy messages which value diversity and challenge deficit' (Hardy and Woodcock 2015, 162). Brunsson (2000) emphasizes that absence of uncertainty and conflicts associated with ambitious activities and practices are important conditions for success.

It does not suffice that the overall general policy focuses on inclusion, if the schools' organization and teaching contradict this policy. If the students experience inclusion wherever and whenever they receive teaching, it is of course good for them. If our aim is inclusive schools, then inclusive pedagogy is essential, but not sufficient. Inclusive education does not only refer to the pedagogy in groups or classrooms. A country might have an inclusive policy, but not inclusive practices in schools, and vice versa, that is, have inclusive school practices but not an inclusive policy (Haug 2010; Vislie 2003).

A gap between ideals and realities

Most European countries express an intention to realize inclusive education in accordance with the advanced definitions. However, the results of its implementation in practice are not at all convincing. Even the practice of the narrow approach to inclusion varies a lot, and does not reflect the ideal definition as presented here. In all countries, there is a gap between formulations and realizations of inclusive education (Graham and Jahnukainen 2011; Göransson and Nilholm 2014; Nes 2010; Smyth et al. 2014). Changes are slow, few and there are many setbacks. As we shall see, it is questionable whether inclusive education has produced the intended results in students' learning. One aspect of this is lack of relevant teacher competence (Tangen 2005), to which I will return later.

In spite of formal decisions in favour of inclusion, tensions and even resistance because of lack of coherence and competing interests mark the implementation (Arduin 2015; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education 2014a, 2014b; Ferguson 2008; Kiuppis 2011; Norwich 2014). There are many examples.

Most nations still practise a dichotomy between special and ordinary education within the concept of inclusion (Anastasiou, Kauffman, and Di Nuovo 2015; Ferguson 2008; Hardy and Woodcock 2015; Haug 2014). A consequence is that placement has become decisive and has contributed to the notion that inclusive education is mostly about how to organize teaching. This reductionist process threatens to narrow the complexity of inclusive education to a single-oriented concentration on students' placement as the only element, as in earlier integration practice. Recent neo-liberal and individualistic values and developments encourage this view (Arduin 2015; Kreitz-Sandberg 2015).

The extent of special education has increased in many countries, as well as the labelling, diagnosing and even segregation of students with disabilities (Allan 2008; Anastasiou, Kauffman, and Di Nuovo 2015; Graham and Jahnukainen 2011). In some countries education for students with disabilities is still underdeveloped and of poor quality. There are countries that understand inclusive education as being only about education for disabled students. Inclusive education then could mean to provide educational opportunities for disabled children, even in special schools with specialist teachers separated from the wider school system (Miles and Singal 2010).

Schools also administer special education outside mainstream classes, some in separate groups as a two-track system. In some countries, there is also a backdoor of different types of special provisions beyond official policy and statistics (Anastasiou, Kauffman, and Di Nuovo 2015; Haug 2014). Authorities in some instances even narrow 'what "general" education is, and who it should be for' (Graham and Jahnukainen 2011, 25) by funding separately the teaching in segregated institutions of students with serious, complex and multiple diagnoses.

To decide on high ambitions in education is relatively easy, with oversell and weak realization as possible consequences (Cuban 2001). Vislie (2003) considers the possibility that special education has received too much attention within inclusive education, at the expense of exploring inclusion as an idea and practice in its own right. Some authors even recommend to non-Western societies in the process of developing inclusive schools to skip special education and move directly to inclusive education (Richardson and Powell 2011).

The research literature presents several obvious explanations about implementation difficulties, and about the differences between countries regarding how to understand and practise inclusive education. Competing initiatives, national traditions and lack of far-reaching changes explain weak implementation.

Competing initiatives

First, inclusive education is not the only imperative in contemporary educational reforms. In real life, education policy combines inclusive initiatives with other reform issues. At present, in most European countries, ideas connected with New Public Management dominate school reforms, alongside inclusive ideas. The different initiatives can compete and be in conflict with each other, and in this case disrupt inclusive ambitions and practices (Florian 2014). It seems that accountability, neo-liberal market orientation and individualization, as well as school competition and demands for higher academic standards, all produce effects that could be obstructive to inclusive ideas in education, and that do not promote inclusive schools (Hardy and Woodcock 2015; Kreitz-Sandberg 2015).

Differing national traditions

The second explanation is the relationship between national historical, economic, societal, cultural and political traditions and established ideas, values and ideologies as well as practices and models of inclusion. There is no model of inclusive education that suits every country (Graham and Jahnukainen 2011; Miles and Singal 2010; Mitchell 2005a). '... a correlation exists between the ideology predominant in a society [...] and its approach to disability and inclusive education [...]' (Arduin 2015, 118). The empirical evidence tells us that to be successful, both importers and exporters of inclusive philosophies must respect local values. This means that it is very challenging for a country and its schools over a short time period to implement an advanced inclusive policy when it is in contrast to established national traditions. Each country must develop its own path to inclusive education (Mitchell 2005a). As a part of this process, it must also bring about its own understanding and perspectives concerning inclusive education. Without doubt, countries and schools can learn from each other. It could be a temptation to copy definitions and approaches from the more experienced. There is a risk involved in directly importing inclusive solutions and strategies from others and, in that way, standardizing school systems. These solutions and strategies might not work, or they could even make things worse.

A complete change in school

To be able to break with established traditions and systems would presuppose a complete change in school policy and practice. To affect all students positively, at least the broad definition of inclusion will demand a profound change of school structure and mentality, which is also the strategy in the

widespread 'Index for Inclusion', a handbook to develop learning and participation in schools (Booth and Ainscow 2011). A report from the OECD claims that to succeed with inclusive education, a change is needed that is more far-reaching than just the relation to special education:

Inclusion goes beyond the integrative idea of assimilating children with disabilities into the existing ordinary school system [...] it requires instead, changes to the school system itself which, *inter alia*, involve alterations on educationalists' perceptions of children's being, some re-thinking of the purposes of education and a reforming of the system generally, all of which needs consideration in the development of 'schools for tomorrow'. (OECD 1999, 22)

Without doubt, such a complete change in schools is both challenging and time-consuming, when the intention is to implement a coherent reform from top to bottom of the system.

What is there in it for the students?

A central element in the debates about inclusive education is the students' learning outcomes and developments. Do they differ in favour of inclusive education, compared to other ideologies and practices as promised? This question deals with research- and evidence-based results, which at present is an issue in current education policy (Kvernbekk 2016).

Empirical evidence has not been decisive for inclusive education

In practice, research evidence is not at all the only argument on which to base political decisions. Policy is also about values and ideologies and about what are realistic and feasible options. It is possible to see inclusive education as primarily a moral imperative. In that case there is no need for empirical support for this kind of education (Cara 2013; Lindsay 2007). Then research evidence is of less interest, or even irrelevant to decisions about inclusion. 'Poor outcome may be found but, it is argued, these should drive us to greater efforts to discover how to implement a policy seen as inherently correct' (Lindsay 2007, 2).

Benefit from teaching does not necessarily belong to the concept of inclusive education. For instance, Hansen and Qvortrup (2013) define inclusion as a combination of three issues: physical, meaning placement, social, that is participation, and psychological, involving students' personal experiences of being included in school. Academic benefit or other substantial outcomes are not a part of their approach, and do not in any way belong to the objectives they will formulate for inclusive education. From the experiences with integration in mainstream classes, where lack of academic benefit for 'integrated students' was one of the main criticisms (Vislie 2003), this stance is quite surprising and unexpected. One of the central ambitions when changing the policy from integration to inclusion was to secure better teaching outcomes for all students (Vislie 2003).

Empirical evidence has so far not been especially important in developing inclusive education. As we will see, the empirical evidence is not at all convincing either. Both have been highly criticized (Kavale and Mostert 2004; Mostert, Kavale, and Kauffmann 2008). To discuss learning effectiveness is a legitimate element in all aspects of education, also in inclusive education (Göransson and Nilholm 2014; Lindsay 2007). There are many publications about the effects both of special and inclusive education, but they are of variable quality. In this research, there are clear methodological shortcomings and very few controlled experiments (Göransson and Nilholm 2014), and the majority of studies research only the benefit for students with disabilities, in accordance with the narrow view of inclusive education.

A validation challenge

In this research about benefit from teaching, the definition of inclusive education differs widely, and is the issue of methodological relevance that I will further discuss here. This is a classic validation challenge, to make sure you study what you think you are studying. There are a multitude of definitions of

inclusive education in practice. As mentioned already, inclusion has different meanings; the implementation and practices vary between, and even within, different nations, systems and at different levels, and involve a variety of aims, teaching philosophies, practices and motives. To be able to conclude about how inclusive education actually functions, there has to be a consensus about definitions and practices (Florian 2014). Today this consensus does not exist, as has been documented here. Therefore, to conclude about what research actually has found out about the effects of inclusive education on students' learning and development is a very confusing and complex task.

For these reasons, contemporary studies and meta-studies of inclusive education for students with disabilities in no way provide a clear answer about the effects (Cara 2013; Göransson and Nilholm 2014; Kavale and Forness 2000; Lindsay 2007). 'Taken as a whole ... there is lack of a firm research base for inclusive education to support either *whether* this is a preferable approach in terms of outcomes, or *how* inclusion should be implemented' (Lindsay 2007, 16).

Effects of poor teaching quality, not inclusion

There are other explanations for the rather unconvincing results about the benefits of inclusive education. The most obvious is probably that the results also depend upon the quality of the teaching. Varying results could be a consequence of weak pedagogical practices, rather than of the low efficacy of inclusive education (Cara 2013). Teachers argue, for instance, that they do not have adequate working conditions to meet all the challenges in inclusive education (Kreitz-Sandberg 2015). Another argument comes from earlier experiences with integration. The students did not receive the adapted teaching they were promised. The reason was that schools did not sufficiently acknowledge their educational needs within the fellowship. The question is to what extent the introduction of inclusive education is simply a linguistic shift or whether it represents a new educational agenda (Vislie 2003). Her conclusion was that the challenge for inclusion is to free itself from the focus on special education and set its own independent agenda. The fact that special education has dominated the debate in the field of inclusive education could have stagnated both practical and theoretical developments. For these reasons, a discussion of teacher and teaching competence is relevant.

Teacher competence

The above discussion of teaching quality clearly relates to teacher competence. Research distinctly shows that teachers are the single most important factor influencing how much students benefit from school (Hanushek 2014; Hattie 2009). It is evident that teaching quality is decisive for the students' learning outcomes. Therefore, here I will concentrate on teachers' competencies and how to teach students with special educational needs within an inclusive setting. The different understandings of the challenges associated with students with differing educational needs indicate at least two distinct solutions with regard to who should dominate teaching within an inclusive school.

Impairment-oriented teaching strategies

One approach is to focus on the students' pathologies, on the personal difficulties behind their learning problems. Research on these issues has concentrated its efforts on teaching for students with disabilities. In principle, it is possible to generalize the same notion of competence to all groups of students in need of special support in school. Then the question is whether these students need teachers with competences corresponding to their special needs. A broad answer to that question is that students with special education needs require distinctive teaching strategies, adapted to each person and dependent upon what constitutes the learning difficulties in the first place. For these reasons, teachers must have extensive knowledge about an individual's difficulties, their specific pathology, their prognoses and expectations (Brownell et al. 2010). To teach all these different groups of students, a school must have a supply of teachers with different special competencies (Kreitz-Sandberg

2015). A highly differentiated and specialized teacher-core will be the solution. The notion that the impairment orientation is most valid is both an argument for and a legitimization of specialist teachers.

Good all-round teaching

The second approach is to follow Vislie (2003) when she considers that special education has received too much attention within inclusive education, at the expense of exploring inclusion as an idea and practice in its own right. The question is what kind of teaching is best for the students in need of special support. One perspective is that these students require 'just' good all-round teaching (Mitchell 2014). Good teaching means approaches with documented general high effect (Hattie 2009). Then there is no need for distinctive impairment-oriented strategies or other pedagogical specializations for most students (Thomas and Loxley 2007). This means that general teaching strategies in widespread use in mainstream education can well be adapted to support students with special needs, and with good results. Meta-studies show that such general teaching strategies give the best results for most students (Florian 2008; Kavale 2007; Mitchell 2014; Norwich and Lewis 2007). One meta-study concludes that:

The pedagogic approaches which have been shown to be effective are accessible for all practitioners. They build on traditional teaching skills and do not require extensive training or deep knowledge of individual impairment characteristics. (Rix and Sheehy 2014, 471)

Without doubt, some students need more time, more practice, more repetitions, slower progression, fewer tasks, etc. but the strategies that provide good results may be the same, independent of whether the student is 'ordinary' or 'special'. Differences between learners are a matter of degree, not a matter of category (Florian 2008). The notion about a dichotomy in teaching between ordinary education and special education seems not to be relevant for the vast majority of students. Instead, there is a continuum where the common general strategies in teaching are dominant, but adapted to the students' abilities (Florian 2008).

When it is the case that ordinary teaching methods are the best way to teach the majority of students, also many of those with disabilities and other special educational needs, then inclusive schools most of all must demand highly qualified ordinary teachers (Florian 2014). Difference is an essential aspect of human life and development in every aspect of learning, which teachers must be aware of and accustomed to meet. Therefore, teachers must trust in the fact that they are capable of teaching all children, as well as continually developing creative new ways of teaching (Florian 2014). To be able to improve general teacher competence, there is also a need to further develop the approaches to teaching in inclusive schools.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the understanding and practices of inclusive education, and the main challenges in developing inclusive education. It has only dealt with issues of broader relevance revealed in the research literature. The content has included elements associated with definitions of inclusive education related both to a horizontal and a vertical dimension, practices of inclusive education, the benefits of inclusive education and teacher competence for inclusive education.

There is consensus between international organizations about how to define inclusive education. Many nations support these definitions, which emphasize inclusive education as an important premise in order to secure equal educational rights for all students. The basic ideas behind inclusive education relate to dominating and common democratic values and social justice. Ideally, inclusion appears as a multi-dimensional issue, where the different elements can support or weaken each other.

From a value perspective, inclusive education should concern all students with special educational needs and not only students with disabilities, which is the dominating perspective at present. In this

respect, one single element appears as the most frequent criterion of inclusion; that is student placement: where the teaching goes on and together with whom. The close connection between inclusive education and special education has made placement, being taught together with all other students, an important element in inclusion, a parallel to what happened earlier in the case of integration. Placement to avoid excluding or segregating any students from their peers seems in practice often to be the most common and single-dominant criterion of inclusion. In some countries, even access to education for all students has been associated with inclusion

The challenge in practical inclusive education, however, is the implementation difficulties. There are differences between nations, but none of them has actually succeeded in constructing a school system that lives up to the ideals and intentions of inclusion. Far from it. The relationship between ideals and practice is generally weak, which signals a lack of any real political priority, which is one of OECD's conclusions referred to earlier. The realization difficulties also come from disagreements about how to operationalize definitions of inclusive education, about what groups of students should be in focus, about access to education and about lack of coherence in educational policy. Teacher competencies in the field of inclusive pedagogy have been poor. The documentation of the effects of inclusive education and pedagogy is confusing. The difficulties also relate to dominating and different national historical, social and political traditions.

There are few simple answers about how to proceed towards successfully implementing inclusive education. Nations differ, challenges differ and schools differ. All institutions must introduce their own processes from where they stand. The idea that we now know what inclusion is, and that implementation now comes next, does not therefore correspond with the realities of the situation.

One issue seems to be of importance for all involved, independent of the definition and practice of inclusive education. That is the struggle to develop educational quality in classrooms so that all students benefit from inclusive education, regardless of which definition of inclusion one supports. Teachers' competencies are decisive for these results. The importance of access and placement in inclusive education has received too much attention, at the expense of developing pedagogical quality. Therefore, to be able to realize inclusive education we have to further develop teachers' competencies in this particular form of education. This has to be done systematically, and must be empirically documented. It will be crucial to reveal the challenges involved in inclusive education and to develop ways in which teachers can meet them. To do so will take time and effort.

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