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Inclusive education across Europe: the move in thinking from integration for inclusion

Educación inclusiva en Europa: el cambio de pensamiento de la integración a la inclusión

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Abstract: In 2009 the Strategic Framework for European Co-operation in Education and Training (ET 2020) set the priorities for education and training for the 21st century. The Council Conclusions of 12 May 2009 of the ET 2020 highlighted inclusive education as the most important objective and the fundamental imperative in education to achieve a just and equal society. Until recently, however, at an international level it was not unusual to talk about integration and special needs education as critical strategies for education and training. The differences between these terms have not always been clear, neither have their implications for practice. After providing an overview of the terminology currently used and discussing the differences between these notions, the article will focus on strategies being used to promote the development of inclusive education in Europe as a way to promote social cohesion and equality. The article shows that a change in terminology does not only require a shift in the language used, but also a shift in educational paradigms and most importantly in the agenda for policy and practice. Examples of some of the changes needed to promote inclusion will be drawn from the recommendations of the UNESCO Policy Guidelines (2009) and Agency work.

Key words: inclusion, inclusive education, integration, special needs education, disability, Europe.

Resumen: En 2009, en el marco estratégico para la Cooperación Europea en la Educación y la Formación (ET 2020) se instituyeron las prioridades para la educación y la formación para el siglo XXI. Las conclusiones del Consejo del 12 de mayo de 2009 del ET 2020, establecieron la educación inclusiva como el objetivo más importante y el imperativo fundamental en la educación para alcanzar una sociedad justa y equitativa. Hasta hace poco, sin embargo, a nivel internacional no era raro hablar acerca de la integración y de la educación especial como elementos críticos de estrategias de educación y formación. Las diferencias entre estos términos

no siempre han sido claras, así como tampoco sus implicaciones en la práctica. Después de proporcionar una visión general de la terminología que se utiliza actualmente y hablar de las diferencias entre estas nociones, este artículo se centrará en las estrategias para promover el desarrollo de la educación inclusiva en Europa, como una forma de promover la igualdad y la cohesión social. El artículo muestra que un cambio en la terminología no sólo requiere un cambio en el lenguaje utilizado, sino también un cambio en los paradigmas educativos y sobre todo, en el orden del día para la política y la práctica. Para ello, se mostrarán ejemplos de algunos de los cambios necesarios para promover la inclusión derivados de las directrices de la política de la UNESCO (2009) y del trabajo de la Agencia.

Palabras clave: inclusión, educación inclusiva, integración, necesidades educativas especiales, discapacidad, Europa.

An overview of the current international agenda for inclusive education

The Strategic Framework for European Co-operation in Education and Training (ET 2020) set out in the Council Conclusions of 12 May 2009 has underlined the role that education and training play for the development of a just and equal society for the 21st century. The framework emphasises that:

“If Europe is to compete and prosper as a knowledge-based economy based on sustainable, high levels of employment and reinforced social cohesion - as envisaged in the Europe 2020 strategy, the role of education and training in a lifelong learning perspective is crucial. The provision of key competences for all on a lifelong learning basis will play a crucial role in improving citizens’ employability, social inclusion and personal fulfilment” (European Council, 2009b, p.4)¹

In the context of the European benchmarks agreed under the ET 2020 Strategic Framework for European co-operation in education and training, European member countries are required to consider measures that can reduce all forms of marginalisation and discrimination, in particular for those individuals at risk of exclusion.

The international conference on ‘*Inclusive Education: A way to promote Social Cohesion*’ held in Madrid under the Spanish Presidency of the European Union on March 11th and 12th, 2010² also brought to the fore the crucial role played by education - and in particular by inclusive education - for the development of contemporary societies. The conference conclusions highlighted that inclusive education is a universal right that should ensure that quality, equity and excellence are safeguarded according to principles such as equal opportunities, non-discrimination and universal access. By taking into account the individual needs of those people who are at risk of social exclusion, unemployment and low achievement,

¹ The full document can be downloaded from the following link:

http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/114374.pdf

² For more information about the conference please go to the following link:

<http://www.european-agency.org/news/inclusive-education-a-way-to-promote-social-cohesion-conference-conclusions-available>

inclusive education contributes to the development of a society that is characterised by social cohesion, democracy and active citizenship.

By providing the same educational opportunities to all learners - from primary to higher education and beyond – inclusive education aims to ensure that no pupils are pushed to the margins of society as a result of their poor competences, their condition of poverty, their ethnic background and most importantly as a result of societal discrimination (e.g. society failing to make the necessary amendments/adjustments). The UNESCO Education for All 2010 Global Monitoring Report 'Reaching the Marginalized' notes that, while absolute average achievement levels are higher in the developed world, in the European Union as a whole, 15% of young people aged 18 to 24 leave school with only lower secondary school education, a figure that rises to 30% in some European countries (UNESCO, 2009b). There is evidence that learners excluded from education are more likely to become socially marginalised and eventually commit crime (Spencer, 1998). It is therefore imperative that societies prepare all learners, including those with special educational needs (SEN henceforward) for adult life.

The above considerations, emphasised by the Council Conclusions (European Council, 2009b) and the conclusions of the Madrid Conference (2010), support the argument that inclusive education is not an end in itself, rather a means to an end (Armstrong and Barton, 1999) i.e. that of creating a just and equal society by starting with education. Although there is a general awareness that inclusion is the way forward in education, there is still a lack of agreement about what inclusive education may actually mean and the implications at the level of policy and practice (D'Alessio and Watkins, 2009). In addition, practice varies a great deal across countries and inclusive education is seen as an 'aim that is still to be achieved' (Madrid Conference Conclusions, 2010).

Special needs education

Issues around inclusion and inclusive education have often been associated with special education and/or special needs education (Clough and Corbett, 2000). Inclusive education has usually been addressed in relation to the education of learners with special educational needs as a way of providing them with all necessary resources to meet their educational requirements. As a result of this, the boundaries between these two disciplines are often blurred. The terms special needs education and inclusive education are however, not synonymous as they are the result of different historical settings, are embedded in different theoretical premises and promote different actions and solutions (Thomas, and Loxley, 2001).

As Agency work suggests, special educational needs is a socially and culturally constructed notion. For example, there is no agreed definition of SEN that can be used comparably across countries. Not all countries define SEN within their legislation and some countries include different types of learners within this definition. The numbers of learners identified as having special educational needs in fact does not vary as a result of the actual incidence of impairments in one country, rather it derives from the different ways in which countries have chosen to organise and arrange their systems of funding, provision, assessment and categorisation of disabilities and special needs (Meijer, 2003).

From an historical perspective, the term special education dates back to the 19th century (Ainscow, 2000). Originally the term special education was used to refer to the

education of learners with impairments that involved the support of specialised personnel and mainly took place in special schools or institutions outside of the mainstream school system. This term was slowly replaced by the term 'special needs education' which took account of the fact that a large proportion of disabled children today are educated in schools or institutions within the mainstream system.

The term 'special needs education' also took account of the fact that the concept of 'children with special educational needs' had been extended beyond disabled children to '*cover those who are failing in school for a wide variety of other reasons that are known to be likely to impede a child's optimal progress.*' This broader group might need additional support depending on '*the extent to which schools need to adapt their curriculum, teaching and organization and/or to provide additional human or material resources so as to stimulate efficient and effective learning for these pupils*'. (UNESCO, 1997, pp. 41 - 42).

Put briefly, the change in terminology from special education to special needs education indicated the beginning of a conceptual shift from a focus on the child (special educational needs) to a focus on the provision that children experiencing difficulties at school may need (special needs education).

Despite this, however, the notion of special needs education has largely remained embedded in a problem-within-the-child approach to education where learners who have 'special needs' must be adequately assessed and their needs addressed (Thomas, 1997; Thomas and Loxley, 2001). The underpinning assumption is that there is something wrong within the child (Armstrong and Barton, 1999) and that society is required to find a way of adjusting and compensating for individual deficits. Such a model is usually referred to as the medical or deficit model of education (Thomas, Walker and Webb, 1998). Although intending to serve the needs of learners, individual identification, classification and referral to special supports are transformed into exclusionary mechanisms as the pupil is often seen as the sole responsibility of the specialised personnel rather than of the class teacher or of the school community (Evans and Lunt, 2002).

O'Hanlon (1995; 2000) and others (for example Slee 1993; Corbett, 1996), argue that it is crucial that the language of educational policies currently used in countries aims to move away from traditional discourses about within-the-child deficit approaches to education. They suggest that policy should engage with debates about systemic changes, what these changes are and how they can be implemented. The recommendations emerging from Agency work such as *Development of a set of Indicators for Inclusive Education in Europe* (2009) and *Key Principles for Promoting Quality in Inclusive Education* (2009), which will be presented in the following sections, support this move towards considerations of systemic change as the basis for policy debates.

From integration to inclusion

In past EU initiatives and documents it was usual to talk about issues concerning integration. This term was first used in the 70s and then mostly in the 80s.³

³ See for example the HELIOS programmes – the first European community conference on handicap and education (Struiksma and Meijer, 1989).

Up until the 90s the term integration was, therefore, very familiar in European policies and debates (O'Hanlon, 2001; Linsday, 2003; Vislie, 2003) and it was mostly used to refer to the education of those pupils who had been previously excluded from mainstream settings.

Integration was largely a 'disability' issue and did not include a wider range of pupils at risk of exclusion (Evans and Lunt, 2002). It was usually associated with issues around placement of disabled learners into mainstream settings, with a focus on the individual deficits of the child rather than of the school limits, as discussed in section 2 (see also Florian, 1998). Debates often addressed issues of adaptation and adjustments of the mainstream setting to include learners with special needs in mainstream schools and classrooms (see OECD, 1994).

At the same time, critiques of integration interpreting it as a process of 'normalisation' (O'Hanlon, 2001) and of 'assimilation' (see Corbett and Slee, 2000) of those learners who were perceived as being different from the norm were not uncommon. The latter critiques brought to the fore issues about the quality of education, beyond placement (Farrell, 2000) emphasising the need for schools to change to accommodate a range of learner needs rather than expecting the learners to 'fit in' with existing practice.

Currently, there are various debates across Europe - at policy-maker and practitioner levels - regarding the use of the words 'integration' and 'inclusion' (and of course their respective translations in all of the languages of the EU). At the EU level, official statements only recently refer to 'inclusion' rather than 'integration'. For some countries, however, the term integration did not have a negative connotation. Pijl, Hegarty and Meijer (1997) indicated that there were 'wider' notions of integration that shared some principles with inclusion. Such evidence was visible in Italy where the term integration was, and still is, often used as a synonym of inclusion or in relation to it.

Although these terms may sometimes be used as synonyms, integration and inclusion relate to very different theories and practice of education. The differences between inclusion and integration may be clarified by considering the work of Booth (1995) and Ainscow and Booth (1998) who point out that integration has usually been interpreted in opposition to segregation and to the dismantling of special schooling while inclusion is understood as being in opposition to exclusion. Exclusion may take different forms that may also occur within mainstream settings (e.g. disabling barriers within formal education system). It is in order to breakdown mechanisms of marginalisation and segregation that inclusion has come into use to replace the concept of integration.

Inclusive education

It was only around the end of the 80s that the term inclusion began to slowly supersede that of integration. This shift suggests that while integration refers to the process of integrating learners back into the mainstream school from which, at some point, they have been excluded, inclusion refers to a learner being a part of their local educational community from the beginning, hence 'a part from the start'.

There is, however, a lack of agreement across Europe concerning the exact meaning of inclusion (Tilstone, Florian, Rose, 1998; Thomas, Walker, Webb, 1998; Vislie, 2003;

Cigman, 2007). Dyson (1999) prefers to speak about 'inclusions' (using the plural) in order to underline the different interpretations currently existing at an international level.

At the same time, it is important to underline that inclusion is not only related to education and can be primarily interpreted in terms of the participation of each member of the population in key activities in society. It is therefore a 'moral' issue in Western countries where all members must be included and must have a stake in society – able to both benefit from society and contribute to its development.

The World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca, with the adoption of the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, clearly set the policy agenda for inclusive education on a global basis (UNESCO, 1994). Since then, many international initiatives have underlined the crucial role played by inclusive education for the development of all learners, including those identified with special educational needs [see for example the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000)].

The UNESCO (2008) definition states that inclusive education is:

'an ongoing process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination'.
(p.3)

Similarly, the UNESCO Policy Guidelines (2009) document indicates that:

'Inclusive education is a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners ... An "inclusive" education system can only be created if ordinary schools become more inclusive – in other words, if they become better at educating all children in their communities' (p. 8).

As suggested by these extracts, inclusive education is not concerned with a particular group of learners, for example learners with special educational needs, but with the transformation of the education system in general (Armstrong, 2008) into a system capable of responding effectively to the totality of learners' diverse needs (Soriano *et al.*, 2009). Consequently, inclusive education is not about placing learners with special educational needs into mainstream settings by responding to their individual needs, but it is about reforming schooling. Schools must be transformed in terms of curriculum, assessment, pedagogy and organisation so that all learners can benefit from education. Similarly, Ainscow (2000) argues that placing a learner with a disability in a mainstream classroom to work on separate tasks with an aide, should not be viewed as inclusive education. Rather, inclusive education is about fighting against and removing all forms of barriers that impede pupils from learning and participating actively in education (Ainscow and Booth, 2000).

The discussion about inclusive practice should shift attention from special education to include the practice of general education, and consequently involve a larger number of stakeholders and positions (Curcic, 2009). Basically, inclusive education moves from a position of providing support and making necessary adaptations to school to enable learners with SEN to be placed in mainstream settings, towards a philosophy of rights for all learners to be educated in the same settings and be provided with the same opportunities for development

notwithstanding their political, economic, social and/or ethnic backgrounds (UNESCO Policy Guidelines, 2009; UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, Article 24, 2006; Madrid conference 2010).

In addition, inclusive education takes into account issues of self-advocacy and the ‘voice’ of all learners. Some recent Agency initiatives, for example *Young Voices: Meeting Diversity in Education* (2007) exemplify this. Inclusive education goes beyond issues of labelling and categorising some learners as ‘special’ in mainstream settings in order to encompass issues of rights and changes for the education system.

The types of change required and effective ways to bring about such change are the main questions confronted by those who are involved in the struggle for inclusion (Barton and Armstrong, 2007; Kyriazopoulou and Weber, 2009).

In conclusion, the different notions are exemplified in the following table that summarises the terminology currently in use and suggests how different terms (and therefore the different theoretical premises that underpin them) may determine different implications for practice:

Aspects/issues	Special needs education	Integration	Inclusive education
Focus	On the individual deficit (in segregated or in mainstream settings)	On the provision of additional support (adaptation, adjustment, resources) that can be provided to the individual within mainstream settings	On the transformation of the structures (systemic change of pedagogy, assessment and curriculum)
Theoretical model	Medical/clinical model of disability. A within-the-child approach to disability	A mixture between medical model, psychological model and social model	Human rights approach. All learners have the right to be educated in the local school without the need of being labelled or categorised as needy or different.
Actions/interventions taken	Assistance and specialist support provided for the individual (in segregated or mainstream settings)	Compensation for the individual deficit (rehabilitation or economic benefits). Specialist support is provided within the mainstream setting	Reform of teaching and learning, and the organisation of mainstream schooling in order to respond to the totality of the student population
Disability is considered as:	Individual deficit and a personal limitation	Interaction between the environment and the person	Form of exclusion and discrimination experienced by people with impairments as a result of the way in which society (and schooling) are currently structured.
Decision making process	Professionals as the main decision makers	Professionals, parents and sometimes pupils with SEN are involved.	The role of disabled people is central (issues of advocacy, self-determination and empowerment – see the UN Convention 2006). Disabled people have a voice in the policy-making process (see for example the Agency initiatives: <i>Young Views on Special Needs Education</i> , 2003 and <i>Young People’s Views on Inclusive Education</i> , 2007)

Table. 1. Summarises the terminology currently in use.

Such an overview can be a useful tool to support understanding of the differences among the notions of special needs education, integration and inclusion and what changes should be implemented to develop inclusive education.

Implementing inclusive education: from theory to practice

In agreement with UNESCO initiatives (UNESCO 2008; 2009) and the Strategic Framework for European Co-operation in Education and Training (ET 2020) (European Council, 2009a) this article argues that inclusive education is concerned with the quality of education, participation in learning and issues of equity and equality for all learners and not simply the process of placing learners identified as having special educational needs in mainstream settings.

Nevertheless, inclusive education continues to be discussed in relation to learners with special educational needs. This can be partly explained as follows. Firstly, it is a way of making terminology easier for policy makers and practitioners to understand and, most importantly it is often in alignment with the definitions used within official documents and educational departments across Europe. Secondly, the vast majority of research work – at national level and comparatively at the international level – is mainly concerned with people with disabilities and learners at risk of school failure as exclusion and marginalisation of this group of learners becomes more visible (D'Alessio and Watkins, 2009). As Slee (2001) and Armstrong (2008) indicate, discrimination becomes more detectable along the lines of disability, race, gender and ethnicity as they are ... *at the sharp edge of where contradictions are mostly felt in the day-to-day life of the classroom ...* (Armstrong, 2008, p.7).

While many authors make reference in their work to “best practices” in inclusive education, very few define “best practice,” or even “inclusive education” in clear terms (Roehr Institute, 2004) and Cushing et al (2008) also note particular difficulties associated with interpreting the literature and case studies of inclusive policy and practice that are often defined narrowly, inconsistently, or without adequate precision. Due to the fact that the term inclusion ‘has passed beyond ambiguity and is becoming a source of confusion’ (Howes et al., 2009, p.6) it is impossible to make any direct comparisons of practice across different countries. The situation is further complicated by the fact that, as has been shown, evaluative judgements on the quality of inclusive practice are underpinned by a range of values and theoretical positions. Furlong and Oancea (2005) argue that it is important to develop an understanding of quality that could assist the development of criteria appropriate for different types of applied and practice-based research. They note increasing pressure for closer links between policy-making and practice but say that researchers still wish to contribute to theoretical knowledge rather than just ‘applied’ knowledge about ‘what works’. Nevertheless, recommendations as well as examples of good practice for implementing inclusion are relevant contributions for the development of inclusive education beyond the theoretical approach often prioritised by academic literature.

To support education for all and remove barriers to participation and learning for all disadvantaged groups, essential links must be made between the reform of the education system and other policies such as those to alleviate poverty, improve maternal and child health, promote gender equality and ensure environmental sustainability and global partnership.

Inclusive policies

In moving towards greater equity, the UNESCO Education for All (EFA) Monitoring Report 2010 identifies three broad sets of policies to help combat marginalisation. These policies can be thought of as the *three points of an inclusive education triangle*: 1) Access and affordability; 2) The learning environment; 3) Entitlements and opportunities.

This highlights the need, in striving for greater equity, to take account of what happens to children beyond the school.

In line with the UNESCO priorities highlighted above, the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education has recently published a report that contains the key principles of inclusive policies agreed upon by Agency member countries. The report *Key Principles for Promoting Quality in Inclusive Education (2009)*⁴ aims to encourage debate among mainstream policy makers across different sectors and phases about the necessary systemic changes in policy and provision to further develop inclusive mainstream education.

These key principles acknowledge that inclusive education is concerned with a far wider range of learners vulnerable to exclusion than those identified as having special educational needs. The inter-related and mutually supporting key principles, which summarise the Agency perspective, are as follows:

- Widening participation to increase educational opportunity for all learners;
- Education and training in inclusive education for all teachers;
- Organisational culture and ethos that promotes inclusion;
- Support structures organised so as to promote inclusion;
- Flexible resourcing systems that promote inclusion;
- Policies that promote inclusion;
- Legislation that promotes inclusion.

Inclusive practice

The ideology of inclusive education, as outlined in this article, is implemented in different ways across different contexts and varies with national policies and priorities which are in turn influenced by a whole range of social, cultural, historical, financial and political issues. In this respect, the UNESCO 2005 EFA monitoring report on quality in education highlights the need to respect 'indigenous' views of quality. Much in agreement with this perspective Mitchell (2005) states:

'Since there is no one model of inclusive education that suits every country's circumstances, caution must be exercised in exporting and importing a particular model. While countries can learn from others' experiences, it is important that they give due consideration to their own social-economic-political-cultural-historical singularities.' (Mitchell, 2005, p.19)

⁴ To download the full report, please go to the following link: <http://www.european-agency.org/news/key-principles-for-promoting-quality-in-inclusive-education-available-now/?searchterm=key%20principles%202009>

Despite the shift in thinking towards educational inclusion as an agreed goal for European countries, agreements on what settings are considered 'inclusive' are not so clear. At a European level, it is fair to say that the term 'inclusive settings' usually refers to mainstream educational provision in schools and classes that has learners with or without special educational needs learning together; works to develop a curriculum that enables the learning and participation of all learners.

Although examples of inclusive practice are different across Europe, fundamental principles can be agreed to overcome barriers which may arise from 'entrenched professional attitudes, class, sexist or racial prejudice, or from cultural misunderstandings' (Rambla et al., 2008). What is crucial is that each country becomes aware of the systemic changes that education systems need to undergo to promote the move away from integration towards inclusion. Put briefly, different stakeholders should understand that the paradigmatic shift required by inclusive education does not simply concern the implementation of a new operational policy (e.g. issues about the redistribution of resources and categorisation procedures) but involves the transformation of the entire education system (D'Alessio, 2009).

Some significant examples of recommendations on the changes needed to promote inclusion can be found in the Agency *Inclusive Education and Classroom Practice in Secondary Education* report (2005). The findings regarding classroom practice suggest seven groups of factors that are thought to be effective for inclusive education:

Co-operative teaching

Teachers need support from, and to be able to co-operate with, a range of colleagues within the school as well as professionals from outside the school.

Co-operative learning

Peer tutoring is effective in cognitive and social-emotional respects. Students who help each other, especially within a system of flexible and well-considered pupil grouping, benefit from learning together.

Collaborative problem solving

For teachers who need help in including students with behavioural problems, a systematic way of approaching undesired behaviour is an effective tool for decreasing the amount and intensity of disturbances during the lessons. Clear class rules, agreed with all the students (alongside appropriate incentives) have proven to be effective.

Heterogeneous grouping

Heterogeneous grouping and a more differentiated approach to education are necessary and effective when dealing with the diversity of students in a classroom.

Effective teaching

The arrangements mentioned above should take place within an overall approach where education is based on assessment, evaluation and high expectations. All students - including

students with SEN - demonstrate improvements in their learning with systematic monitoring, assessment, planning and evaluation of their work. The curriculum can be geared to individual needs and additional support can be introduced through the Individual Educational Plan (IEP). This IEP should support participation in the normal curriculum.

Home area system

In some schools the organisation of the delivery of the curriculum has been changed drastically: students stay in a common area consisting of two or three classrooms where nearly all education takes place. A small team of teachers is responsible for the education provided in the home area.

Alternative ways of learning

To support the inclusion of students with special needs, several models that focus on learning strategies have been developed over the past few years. Such programmes aim to teach students how to learn and to solve problems. Furthermore it can be argued that giving students greater responsibility for their own learning can contribute to the success of inclusion in secondary schools.

More recently, UNESCO policy Guidelines (2009) have suggested that in order to implement inclusive education, policy makers should take into account the following issues:

- Attitudinal changes and policy development;
- Ensuring inclusion through early childhood care and education;
- Inclusive curricula;
- Teachers and teacher education;
- Resources and legislation.

In order to encourage and sustain such developments within and outside schooling it becomes crucial that stakeholders promote relevant changes at the level of culture, policy and practice. At the level of culture, inclusive principles should be disseminated and agreed. Inclusive culture should not be concerned only with learners with special educational needs but with the entire school personnel and community (both within and outside school). At the level of policy, it is critical to remove all disabling barriers that are embedded in current policies for example, the way in which policies are formulated and the language used. Ensuring accessibility, incorporating universality principles, as well as promoting self-advocacy and involving disabled people in the process of policy-making are further key issues. Finally at the level of practice, it is essential to develop further teacher training, to develop visionary leadership that promotes community based learning, and to train teacher trainers (see also the benchmarks included in the Progress towards the Lisbon Objectives in Education and Training, Commission of the European Communities, 2008).

Inclusive education: the need for research evidence or a question of human rights?

Although there is international agreement that inclusive education is a human rights issue (UN, 2006), there exists a critique that undermines the development of inclusive education. Some writers (for example Farrell, 2000; Campbell, 2002; Warnock, 2005; Cigman, 2007) claim that

there are few empirical research findings providing evidence that inclusive education is actually a better solution for the education of learners with special educational needs. There are clearly some methodological problems that make it difficult for inclusive education research to give 'proof' of the effectiveness of inclusion (Farrell, 2000). These difficulties include: using a matched control group (e.g. one group placed in a mainstream setting and another placed in a segregated setting) as people have different characteristics; the difficulty of generalising from one study to another as, again, individuals differ, and the difficulty in 'evaluating' the quality of inclusive provision that is being offered and which, due to the complexity discussed above, is not always comparable.

Although this view is still embedded in a perspective that considers inclusion only in terms of mainstreaming rather than as an issue of systemic change, it nevertheless, adds to the discourses that oppose inclusion as a human rights issue. This critique also fails to understand that inclusive education is not only a normative issue (see Meijer, 2010) but also that there is an increasing amount of research evidence currently available which supports the effectiveness of inclusion both through experimental and correlational research designs (Curcic, 2009).

Whilst a decade ago Farrell (2000) argued that evidence to support inclusive education was inconclusive and that further research was needed, in a recent article, Curcic (2009) collected a series of studies to provide evidence that learners experiencing difficulties at school achieve better results both in social and academic skills when they are educated in mainstream education. Similarly, other scholars (Ainscow and Booth, 1998; Allan, 1999; Booth and Ainscow, 2000; Allan, 2003; Armstrong, D., 2003; Armstrong, F., 2003; Ainscow, 2005; Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006; Ainscow, 2007; Barton and Armstrong, 2007; Slee, 2007) have provided evidence of research conducted in the field of inclusive education that supports its further development.

Likewise, many Agency works such as *Inclusive Education and Classroom Practice in Secondary Education* (Meijer, 2005) and *Assessment in Inclusive Settings* (Watkins, 2007) among others, have provided good examples of how inclusive education can be implemented in practice and can be successful for the education of learners identified as having special educational needs. As Agency work in fact shows, it is undoubtedly true that *what is good for pupils with SEN is good for all pupils* (Meijer, 2003).

More recently, Meijer (2010) discusses the place of research in the debate about inclusion:

A discussion characterised by debating research outcomes in this area is not very fruitful for various reasons. Firstly, it distracts us from the normative discussion and arguments. Secondly - and I can tell this by being a researcher in this area myself for many years - research, especially in the social sciences, is never unambiguous! Thirdly, the type of research that is needed to come to clear answers in this field is the experimental design and not the correlational design. It is the correlational design that has been used to a large extent to 'prove' the outcome and benefits of inclusion versus segregation. And correlational designs are weak, if not very weak ... For me, the discussion about the relevance and necessity of social cohesion as well as inclusive education and the influence of inclusive education on social cohesion are purely normative issues. And we should keep it there! (Meijer, 2010).

Likewise, the UNESCO Policy Guidelines (2009) state that inclusive education should:

'as an overall principle ... guide all education policies and practices, starting from the fact that education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just and equal society' (p.8). These guidelines put the emphasis on issues of rights, rather than research evidence and set out the following justifications for working towards inclusive practices and educating all children together:

Educational justification.

Inclusive schools have to develop ways of teaching that respond to individual differences and benefit all children.

Social justification.

Inclusive schools are able to change attitudes towards diversity and form the basis for a just, non-discriminatory society.

Economic justification.

It costs less to establish and maintain schools that educate all children together than to set up a complex system of different schools 'specialising' in different groups of children.

Arnesen et al (2009) in a Council of Europe project report note that equity and social justice *'imply activities to the benefit of all, targeting each individual.'* (p.46) and state that by using the term equity, *'inclusion may be understood not just as adding on to existing structures, but as a process of transforming societies, communities and institutions such as schools to become diversity-sensitive.'* (p.46) Although the project focused on socio-cultural diversity, the authors make the point that the international commitment to human rights has led to a changing view and a reduced emphasis on an individual's 'disability' that has, in turn, led to their classification as 'socio-cultural'. This view is consistent with the disability studies perspective that recognises disability as *'another interesting way to be alive'* (Smith et al 2009, p. 243) and individual support viewed as the norm for all learners.

Both the UNESCO and Council of Europe resolutions therefore reiterate that inclusive education is to be understood as a *human rights* issue. Such a perspective not only shifts the attention from individual deficits to disabling societal barriers but also challenges the need to classify and label some learners as 'special' in order to exert their right to education along with their 'normal' peers. As argued by Barton and Armstrong (2001), central to the notion of human rights is the need to understand the causes that produce exclusion and discrimination of disabled learners by attitudes, practices and policies. If inclusive education is to become a reality and support a move to a more just society there is a need to look at the root cause of problems such as poverty, discrimination and disadvantage which lead to social and economic exclusion with an impact on health and well-being.

Children and young people living in poverty and/or in poor health are not able to benefit from education and a holistic approach is needed to change existing systems and ensure that everyone – including the most disadvantaged - can access the services needed to ensure that their basic needs are met. This is not only about physical access such as transport but also about making necessary adjustments, for example to ensure that an individual can perform the

necessary tasks as part of their employment to fully participate and become a valued member of society.

Such a holistic approach requires allocation of resources to meet individual needs within a flexible system – but this needs to be considered ‘up front’ not as an afterthought – to address both access and support dimensions. Universal design of all public services – including education - will benefit all users – not only those with disabilities.

Conclusions

This article has suggested that the interpretation of inclusive education and its practice vary across Europe. Some countries still educate young people in special schools, others are in the process of developing ‘integration’, while many have started to promote inclusive practice. Although some fundamental benchmarks and common values have been identified as crucial, countries keep developing their own education systems according to their traditional policies and aims, not to mention the widely varying economic resources available. Similarly, different definitions of inclusion are being used and policy makers and practitioners are not always talking about the same thing (D'Alessio and Watkins, 2009).

At the same time, inclusive education in all countries is not a static phenomenon - it has been developing in different ways and continues to develop (Watkins, 2009; Kyriazopoulou and Weber, 2009; Meijer, 2010). Conceptions of, policies for and practice in inclusive education are constantly undergoing change and any examination of inclusive education and ‘current’ practice in any country needs to be considered within the context of wider educational reforms occurring in that country. Despite that the article makes the case that there exists a shared value that inclusion is the educational imperative to be pursued as a human rights issue. In alignment with the principle of human rights highlighted by Schaeffer (2008) the Agency Director’s speech at the International Conference of Madrid (Meijer, 2010) suggests that in order to achieve a truly inclusive education system, a rights-based approach is needed which has the following inter-related dimensions:

- The right *to* education – education granted to everyone without discrimination;
- Rights *in* education – rights of learners should be respected within the learning environment and be reflected in curricula, materials and methodologies;
- Rights *through* education – democratic values and respect for human rights should be promoted.

The Agency,⁵ working with member countries and collaborating with partners such as UNESCO will continue to pursue this approach to support and enhance the successful inclusion and participation of all learners.

⁵ In order to find more information about how inclusive education is being interpreted and implemented across Europe, all of the Agency work referred to in this article can be downloaded from the following website: www.european-agency-org

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