

Editorial

International Perspectives on Inclusion in Education: Exploring Common Ground from Different Angles

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Inclusion in education is a globally shared principle, and its aim is to guarantee, secure, and promote the equality and equity of all people by removing barriers to learning and social participation. It is not an outcome but an ongoing principled process that requires commitment and dedication, and this is carried out through aligning various inclusive policies, cultural elements, and institutional, discursive, social, and pedagogical practices. Regardless of globally shared endeavours, the trajectories of inclusion in education, including both advances and barriers, have understandably taken varying historically, culturally, structurally, and politically engrained forms among nations. Take our countries of origin—Finland and Greece—as an example of how structural and policy differences in primary and lower-secondary schooling (grades 1–9, ages 7–16 in Finland; grades 1–9, ages 6–15 in Greece) characterize the foundational differences for promoting inclusion in education.

Based on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report, in Finland, expenditure on education as a proportion of the Gross Domestic Product (GPD) is higher than the OECD average [1]. The Finnish educational system is decentralized. As such, the government allocates funding for education to municipalities, but local authorities have autonomy in how they fund education and other public expenditures. Central transfers are calculated according to the number of residents aged 6–15 years. Other factors are also considered, such as geographical remoteness, population density, and weighted funding received for students for whom the duration of compulsory education is extended based on severe disabilities or serious illness [1,2]. Within this system, regional differences in providing support, as well as inequalities in the ability to arrange sufficient support services, exist [3,4]. Quite to the contrary, in Greece, expenditure on education as a proportion of the GPD is lower than the OECD average [5]. The Greek educational system is highly centralized, with all funding provided by the state. Greece has a large shadow education sector and one of the highest household expenditures on education among countries ranked by the OECD [5]. One characteristic example specific to the education of disabled children is the institution of the special assistant, which “allows” parents or carers to hire someone to support their child in mainstream schools. This effectively transfers the responsibility and cost of education from the state to the families of disabled children [6].

One indication of the inclusive orientation of a national educational system is the number of segregated schools and the number of students enrolled in them. In Finland, the general trend of providing more individualised support in schooling since the late 1990s has been towards full-time or part-time placement in general education, and the number of special schools has decreased steadily [7–9]. Regarding the connection of educational services to diagnoses, in Finland, the non-diagnostic approach to providing pedagogical support provision was strengthened ever since the early 2000s. Diagnoses play no official role in the Finnish support system; instead, the identification of the need for more support, as well as the planning and implementation of support, should be grounded on the basis of



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a pedagogical evaluation and only supplemented with psychological or medical statements if necessary [2]. On the other hand, in Greece, there has been a noticeable increase in both the number of special schools and the enrolment of students in them since 2010 [10–13]. At the same time, education policy discourse appears to have taken a turn towards inclusive education, but this was never realized through concrete policymaking and/or implementation [14]. Instead, a diagnostic culture intertwined with medicalized and individualized conceptualizations still governs educational policies, provisions, and practices for disabled students; diagnoses, labelling, and categorization remain the foundation of educational support for these students.

Advancing inclusion in education necessitates culturally situated programmatic responses founded on cross-nationally shared conceptualization and intellectual resources that can best support educators on a global scale [15]. Political and sociocultural structures that shape the meaning of education should be explicitly incorporated into the agenda of inclusive education. The papers included in this Special Issue address the topic of inclusive education from various perspectives and at different levels. Specifically, they delve into inclusive education across various realms, including academic discourse, educational and social policies, community involvement, educational leadership, and teaching practices. The researchers of these papers also utilized a variety of methods, including literature reviews, as well as qualitative and quantitative methodologies. In terms of the international scope of our Special Issue, this was addressed in two ways: the articles offer insights from six countries representing two continents (Africa and Europe), and they provide a global-level analysis of inclusive education as a principled norm, in addition to an analysis of the development of inclusive education discourse within the inclusive education scholarship.

As depicted by Schuelka, Johnstone, Thomas, and Artiles [16] (p. xxxiii), “inclusive education is meaningful only when embedded in understandings about community and communality; only when seen as both reflective of, and as creating, inclusion in society”. A positive sense of belonging, identities, health, safety, acceptance, learning, recognition, and friendships, as well as meaningful societal participation and contribution, including employment opportunities, are all part of inclusion in society and are, thus, the aims of inclusive education. Accordingly, research on inclusive education must seriously address a variety of intersecting issues that pose barriers to access to quality education and to society as a valued member. Class, gender, race, disability, racialization, ableism, disablism, and hetero- and cis-normativity, as well as geographical location, poverty, and resource allocation, are examples of intersecting issues that pose barriers to inclusion in education.

Considering Brantlinger [17], from the inception of this Special Issue, we have been attentive to the ideologies concerning the education of disabled children. Promoting inclusive education by adhering to SEN discourse is not responsive to diverse and unequal contexts of schooling. We have consistently upheld our decision to reject papers that employ language that perpetuates disablism or advocate for segregationist school settings or other disablist practices. Instead, this Special Issue serves as a platform where published papers, no matter their abovementioned differences, share a common thread—to promote our knowledge regarding the ongoing process of inclusive education.

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