

# The inclusion challenge

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## **Introduction**

The inclusion of all children in mainstream schools has been adopted as a key educational policy across Europe. It is, however, a policy which has been experienced as challenging, not least of all because of uncertainty over its meaning, and which has met with some resistance. Rosenqvist argues that political, ideological and, to an extent, scientific trends point towards a certain inevitability of “the school for all”, but there are, nevertheless, elements that threaten to undermine its progress and prospects. This paper takes a look at inclusion within Europe. It considers how inclusion is understood and the questions currently being raised about its feasibility. It examines the shifting political and policy contexts and recent patterns and trends towards inclusion and indeed exclusion. The paper ends with a discussion of the prospects and possibilities for inclusion.

## **Understanding what it means to include**

There is much uncertainty among researchers and teachers about what it means to include. Whilst Rosenqvist (1995; 2007) argues that the uncertainty in research leaves open possibilities for having an influence, the insecurities among teachers are more of a concern. The establishment of the notion of inclusion, in the early 1990s, was intended to replace integration, which had come to be seen as too limiting because it was overly complex and yet was restricted to the physical placement of children with special needs in mainstream schools (Lewis, 1995; Florian, 1998; Rosenqvist, 1996). Among the critics of integration was Slee (2001), who argued that it had been little more than calculus of equity, concerned with measuring the extent of a student’s disability, with a view to calculating the resource loading to accompany that student into school. Slee describes the crude mathematical formula which is used: Equity [E] is achieved when you add Additional Resources [AR] to the Disabled Student [D], thus  $E = AR + D$ . Inclusion was considered a more desirable alternative because it was still about increasing participa-

tion of children in mainstream schools, but was also focused on the changes required by the schools to their structures, ethos and practices and on removing barriers (which may be environmental, structural or attitudinal) to children's participation. However, questions have arisen about inclusion from various quarters. Researchers are asking about who is to be included and into what. Teachers and their representative unions have recently asked why they should include and at what cost. Parents are wondering why they and their children are let down so badly and children seem genuinely perplexed that it is so difficult to do inclusion.

Researchers report that teachers are increasingly talking about inclusion as an impossibility in the current climate (Croll & Moses, 2000; Thomas & Vaughan, 2004), lacking confidence in their own competence to deliver inclusion with existing resources (Mittler, 2000; Hanko, 2005). In research undertaken by Macbeath et al. (2006), there was a general positive regard among teachers for inclusion, with a recognition of the benefits for all pupils, yet they expressed concern about whether mainstream schools were able to provide a suitable education for children with complex emotional needs. Teachers also questioned whether alternative, special provision might better serve children with complex special needs. These findings have led some researchers to speculate on whether inclusion may ever be realised (Hegarty, 2001; Hornby, 2003) and indeed Hegarty (2001, p. 249) has called for the abandonment of the "easy sloganising" of inclusion. There has not, however, been the baying demand for evidence that inclusion works nor the dismissal of inclusion as little more than an ideological "bandwagon" (Kavale & Mostart, 2004, p. 234) that has been heard in the US from the special educators, assiduously protecting their interests and refusing to acknowledge the ideological nature of their own position.

One of the UK teachers unions, the National Association of Schoolmasters and Women Teachers Unions (NASUWT), has recently placed special educational needs at the top of their agenda for debate. At the heart of their concerns is the uncertainty about the meaning of inclusion:

*Teachers welcome children with special needs into mainstream schools providing that the school can meet their needs and the motivation for the placement is in the best interests of the child rather than a drive by local authorities to save money on specialist provision and support. However, a lack of a clear shared, national definition of what inclusion means and the variation of provision across the country means pupils, parents and indeed teachers face a postcode lottery of support and provision (NASUWT, 2009).*

This union has previously described total inclusion as a "form of child abuse" (NASUWT, 2009), while the President of the main teachers union in Scotland, the Educational Institute of Scotland has ventured that "the strain imposed by social inclusion in some of our schools is in danger of becoming a time bomb waiting to explode unless properly resourced" (Mackie, 2004). A personal testimony from a Scottish primary teacher, writing anonymously revealed deep concerns about the costs of inclusion:

*Teachers just cannot spread themselves equally amongst their pupils [...] Classrooms were never about learning, they are about social interaction and building confidence and about pupils becoming 'whole' people. No-one would wish to exclude*

*any child from being part of this experience but at what cost to others when the problems are such that the learning environment is destroyed and everyone pays a price? (Primary teacher, General Teaching Council Scotland, 2004, p. 13)*

Questions and concerns about inclusion from teachers have stemmed from their confusion about what it is supposed to do and for whom; frustration about being unable to undertake it because of pressures from competing policy demands, especially from drives to raise achievement; guilt about letting down children and parents; and exhaustion, feeling that things cannot continue as they are (Allan, 2008). Teachers have reacted to inclusion by complaining about their lack of knowledge and experience and by asking for training (Meijer, 2003; Pijl & Frissen, 2009). Difficulties with the “transformation from ideal into practice” (Haug, undated) are reported as widespread across Europe and indeed beyond (Mitchell, 2005; Rix et al., 2005; Persson, 2006).

Baroness Warnock, recognised as the “architect” of inclusion in the UK, has weighed in with, not so much questions about inclusion, but a damning pronouncement on inclusion as “disastrous” (Warnock, 2005, p. 22). In a pamphlet published by the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, she declared it to have been a mistake to have thought that all children could succeed in mainstream schools and lamented that “children are the casualties” (ibid., p. 14) of this mistake. Her call for a return to segregated schooling, at least for some people, was denounced roundly by inclusion commentators such as Barton (2005) and Norwich (2006), who expressed disappointment and puzzlement at her lack of familiarity with the field of inclusion and its current debates, but was seen as a vindication by others (Spurgeon, 2006; Wing, 2006) and as an indication that “the tide is turning on SEN provision” (Gloucestershire Special Schools Protection League, 2005). The General Teaching Council in Scotland, which invited Warnock to address its members on the subject of her pamphlet, apologised for accidentally misprinting the title of her lecture, so that it appeared not, as intended, as *From integration to inclusion*, but *From integration to exclusion*. However, this new inflection was closer to her intended argument which seemed, from the reactions by teachers and local authority personnel, to be aligned with their concerns.

Parents have become increasingly concerned about the unwillingness of schools to accept their child (Audit Commission, 2002; Ofsted, 2004) and have experienced considerable pain and anguish during the “long road to statementing” and in the “struggle to get a child with special needs everything it needed to be fully included” (Macbeath et al., 2006, pp. 59-60). Their experiences in the role as “consumer” and “partner” (Vincent, 2000, p. 2) appear to be negative and exclusionary. For those parents whose children have made it into mainstream, there have been concerns about the schools’ reluctance to embrace full inclusion (www.Disability-Resources.org; National Council on Disability, 1994) and worries that the teachers are ill prepared to give their children the support they need (Eason, 2004; Macbeth et al., 2006).

The many children and young people whom I have encountered, whilst undertaking research, find inclusion such a simple concept and such an obvious right that they are mystified as to why adults experience it as such a struggle. In one study of children’s rights (Allan et al., 2006), a group of children were invited to

look at inclusion in their school and they very quickly and easily understood this to be about both increasing participation and removing the barriers in the school. They readily identified the barriers as coming from the school environment, structures and attitudes but found themselves puzzled that the adults could not avoid displaying behaviours and attitudes which so obviously restricted participation. In research with young disabled students, teachers presented the biggest barriers to their efforts to actively seek inclusion and both the disabled students and their non-disabled peers found this disappointing and frustrating (Allan, 1999). And at a recent seminar event for children and young people – to discuss diversity – teachers were again criticised for making too much of diversity by “overprotecting” disabled students and standing in the way, literally, of social interaction (Allan & Smyth, 2009). Research with children and young people undertaken by Lewis (1995) and Davis et al. (2008) has underlined the poor understanding which adults had of disabled children and their needs and their assumption that communication with them will be difficult and uninformative.

### **Shifting political and policy contexts**

A number of shifts can be discerned, within European political and policy contexts, which appear to have had an impact on countries' stance in relation to inclusion. These shifts appear to represent what Ozga and Jones (2006, p. 2) refer to as “travelling policy”, migrating between countries and representing a relatively coherent set of policy concerns across Europe and beyond. The features of these policy concerns include a focus on economic need; emphasis on rapid reform; insistence on the national education system becoming “world class”, as evidenced through international league tables such as PISA and TIMSS, enabling irresistible country comparisons; belief in the benefits of business involvement in state schooling; and the promotion of differentiation at the expense of equality of opportunity (Alexiadou, 2002). These policies are “sedimented into institutions and operative networks” (Robertson, 2006) and given credence and acceptability through a careful process of reiteration, elaboration and inflection (Ball, 2007). However these policies are recognised as undermining countries' efforts to promote a social inclusion agenda and as actively contributing to inequalities (Gillbourn & Youdell, 2000; Ball, 2000; Fielding, 2001).

Responsibilities for inclusion are often held across ministries (e.g. health, education, social welfare), with little connection between these. At the same time, however, the language of public services is becoming infused with the prefixes “inter”, “multi” and “co” and Hartley (2009, p. 127) points out that this “inter-regnum” disturbs accepted understandings about school and expectations of professionals and blurs the distinction between consumer and provider. Inclusion, in this new configuration, is thus a shared responsibility, among professionals and involving parents, and one where the lines of accountability are (even) less clear. The implication within policies on inclusion, especially those urging joined up working, is that it can be achieved through improved governance and service delivery, but as Edwards, Armstrong and Miller (2001, p. 420) point out, this contradicts the idea that exclusion and inequality are actually created through “the economic mode of production”.

Pijl and Frissen (2009), casting a look across Europe, argue that the interventions in schools by policymakers, in an attempt to make them more inclusive, are misplaced because they treat schools as “machine bureaucracies”, rather than professional ones. They also note that the “experimental” (p. 371) inclusion projects started by policymakers in several countries, including Germany, Austria and the Netherlands, have not been a success. Schools have been given additional resources, in the hope that they will develop “good practice” (p. 371) that can be transferred to other schools. Not surprisingly, they observe, other schools are reluctant to accept the additional responsibilities without the same level of resources. Pijl and Frissen contend that if policymakers are to have any success in promoting inclusion they need to avoid such experimental approaches and, importantly, “back off” (p. 374), leaving schools to develop their own inclusive practices. In spite of the strong tradition, especially in Scandinavia, of democratic education and of a “school for all” (Vislie, 2006; Haug, undated), the reality of the inclusive school is seldom in evidence (Haug, 2006; Helldin, 2007; Persson, 2003). The incursion of inclusion into educational policies in these countries has come as something of a surprise and Haug (ibid.) notes how inclusion has often not been properly defined. Consequently, the concept of inclusion has been a diffuse part of policy and remains a political concept tied more closely to special education than to democratic education.

An exceptional situation can be observed in a Swedish municipality, Essunga, which has sought to reverse its trend of low performance in the league tables through inclusive education and by an approach that views heterogeneity among students as a resource. Persson and Persson (2011) indicate that the initial results underline the compatibility of achievement and inclusive agendas, surrounded by strong and purposeful research-based professional development and shared goals. One of the major challenges for the staff of Essunga, and for the researchers, is to resist the considerable pressure to produce simplistic explanations of what has been achieved. The other challenge is to maintain their success. Staff have responded to the second challenge by accepting that inclusion is not a final destination but something that must be struggled for every day and by everyone.

In many parts of Europe, the strong traditions of “defectology”, which focuses on individual deficits and the means of remedying them, continue to infuse inclusion and special needs policies. Rosenqvist (2000) argues that the appointment and subsequent sorting out by schools of its deviants is done with good intentions but can nevertheless create negative consequences, while Watson (2009, p. 162) notes how in Scotland there is a prevalence of deficit oriented language in inclusion policy and an assumption that “support provides the necessary scaffold to make good this deficit”. The paradox that the naming of deficits is instrumental in releasing resources remains. However, a more constructive acknowledgement of labelling, as part of a dualist system, is offered by Emmanuelsson, Persson and Rosenqvist (2001). They distinguish between psychomedical and societal oriented approaches, characterising them as categorical and relational perspectives and arguing for recognition of the two systems and discourses. Rosenqvist (2007), whilst endorsing this view, notes a greater predisposition in recent years towards seeing all pupils as equal and, within Sweden at least, towards viewing pupils’ differences as a resource.

An increasing individualisation may be discerned in assessment processes, “personalised learning” and, for those with special educational needs, Individualised Educational Programmes.

At the same time as these policy shifts appear to be undermining inclusion, there are some powerful legal frameworks which uphold the rights of children to be included. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, endorsed and ratified across Europe, safeguards certain rights and provides a mandate for greater participation by children, although Lee (1999) describes Article 14, which refers explicitly to children’s participation, as a mixture of potential toothlessness and bold intent. The European Convention on Human Rights protects human rights and freedoms within Europe and, as will be reported later in this paper, has been used successfully to challenge exclusion.

### **Patterns, trends and challenges**

It is salutary to note, when considering the inclusion of children in mainstream schools, as opposed to special schools, that in many parts of Europe there are children who are not even in school. A regional study on education in Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (UNICEF, 2007) identified 2.4 million “missing children”, of primary school age who were not in education and 12 million children of lower and upper secondary school age not in education. The majority of these were in Turkey, the Russian Federation and the Ukraine. The study noted particularly low secondary enrolment rates in rural areas within Tajikistan, Turkey and Albania, often linked with gender, with traditional families unwilling to send girls into cities for secondary education, but the report concluded that gender inequality was not a significant problem. Minority ethnic groups were reported as being at an educational disadvantage in several countries and children of Roma, in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia, were particularly under-represented in the school population and over-represented in residential care institutions and special schools. Inequalities among disabled children were highlighted as a significant problem, with limited educational opportunities for disabled children outside institutional provision in several countries. The highest proportions of institutionalised children were found in Belarus, Bulgaria, Moldova and the Russian Federation. There was also concern that an estimated 1 million disabled children were unaccounted for within Europe, either through incomplete registration or the high infant mortality rate of disabled children. The UNICEF report looked at higher education provision and noted that the over-expansion in higher education (over 55 %) in some countries had left them struggling to cope while other countries, especially in the Caucasus and Central Asia, had been left behind in the rush to expand higher education. UNICEF called for policy measures which would increase expenditure on education whilst also decreasing it through rationalisation and convergence of separate systems, but also recommended anti-discrimination legislation and the breaking of several “vicious circles” (ibid., p. 169) which prevented particular groups – girls and ethnic minorities in some countries and poor and disabled children in all countries – from gaining access to quality education.

On a wider scale, The World Report on Disability (WHO, 2011) paints a bleak picture, reporting people with disabilities as facing a number of problems including poorer health, lower educational achievements and higher rates of poverty than people without disabilities. The report noted significantly lower primary school completions by disabled children and lower rates of transition to secondary and higher education. There were difficulties, however, in obtaining an accurate picture of the educational experiences of disabled children because of the very different understandings and assumptions about human difference and disability. This also makes comparisons between countries highly problematic. Levels of inclusion vary across the world, but the report notes significant variation within Europe, with Iceland, followed by Sweden, Norway, Malta and Cyprus with the highest levels of inclusion and Germany, followed by Latvia, the Netherlands, Luxemborg and Hungary with the lowest rates of inclusion. A number of barriers, including a lack of teacher capacity to teach inclusively, were identified. The report underlines the importance of access by all to a quality education as “key to human capital formation and their participation in social and economic life” (ibid., p. 226) and calls on governments to develop policies and improve data and information; identify inclusion strategies to promote inclusion; provide specialist support; and promote participation.

It has been interesting to see how the Human Rights legislation has been used successfully to challenge the discrimination and exclusion faced by Roma children and whilst this is a very particular example, it highlights the potency of the legislation. In 2007, the Czech Republic brought a case to the European Court of Human Rights to challenge the practice of “shunting” Roma children into special schools. In the case, presented on behalf of eighteen Roma children, it was argued that Roma children in the City of Ostrava were 27 times more likely to be segregated than other similarly situated non-Roma children. The Court ruled that the practice of segregating non-Roma children amounted to unlawful discrimination in breach of Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights. It had reached the decision that special schools had a “prejudicial impact” (Open Society Justice Initiative, 2007), but importantly had embraced the principle of indirect discrimination, which allowed for a *prima facie* allegation of discrimination to shift the burden to the defendant state to prove that any difference in treatment was not discriminatory. This outcome was hailed as a “Pathbreaking judgement” in relation to inclusion: “Its ruling is particularly significant now, as Europe grapples with the implications of its rapidly growing ethnic, racial and religious diversity” (Open Society Justice Initiative, 2007).

Some strong challenges to exclusion have also come from voluntary sector organisations. Some of these organisations, which actively campaign for inclusion, have been particularly effective in lobbying governments although they also provide an important role in supporting parents. Within the UK, *The Alliance for Inclusion and Parents for Inclusion*, and in Scotland, *Equity in Education* have been prominent and influential while elsewhere, there have been notable successes in fighting for inclusion by the Flanders group *Parents for Inclusion* and *Speranta* in Romania. Some organisations dedicated to particular impairments, for example *FUB* (The National Association for Children with Intellectual Disability) in Sweden, *Inclusion*



Europe, which represents people with intellectual impairment and their families on an international basis, and in the UK, the *Dyslexia Association* and the *Autistic Society*, have lobbied for better recognition and provision only for those children and young people with a specific impairment, and this may include support for a special school placement. Disability groups, often run by disabled people for disabled people, have tended not to focus on education, but on the right of disabled people to be included in society more generally. However the UK organisation *People First* adopted a highly successful and high profile campaign for inclusive education, which it took to the Government to guide its response to the House of Commons Select Committee Report (2006), which had been equivocal about inclusion, and this answered the questions from teachers unions and others about the viability of inclusion:

*Over the last few months we have seen the inclusion of our disabled children and young people being ATTACKED by teacher's unions, academics and by the Government. And on every occasion the voices of inclusion have been IGNORED – those of us who know that inclusion can work and does work [...] The Government's response to the Education and Skills Select Committee's report on SEN is due in October so we must DISPEL THE MYTHS in the report that inclusion isn't working and that disabled children and young people are better segregated from their communities (People First, without year).*

*People First's* other current campaign – “Not dead yet” – is focused on assisted dying and is extremely powerful, but *People First* argues, in calling for disabled people and parents to provide their stories of how inclusion has made a difference, that this campaign needs to be “bigger than the inclusion movement” in order to succeed. Whilst the activism by the voluntary sector organisations and *People First* has been important it does not seem to have led to wholehearted acceptance of inclusion.

### **Inclusion: prospects and possibilities**

Looking ahead, it would seem that the current educational climate is a particularly challenging one and is one in which inclusion appears to be all the more difficult to achieve. The economically driven imperative to raise achievement and the fragmentation of provision threaten to undermine inclusion whilst the emphasis on individualisation and the continued dominance of “special needs” and, in some parts of Europe, defectology discourage approaches to inclusive practice which are about all children. At the same time, the power of legal frameworks, particularly the European Convention on Human Rights, to challenge exclusion and discrimination and the mandate for children's participation and inclusion set by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child provides some grounds for optimism.

There are clearly some concerns about the capacity of the education system – and the teachers within it – to “deliver” inclusion and it is teachers and their unions who are expressing these concerns most volubly. It would be a mistake to interpret these concerns as a lack of commitment to providing the best educational opportunities for all. Rather, it is vital that their very real concerns, and those voiced by others such as researchers, parents and children, are heard and responded to. The most urgent issues to be addressed are the competing policy demands



and problems associated with provision which is fragmented or not “joined-up”. Furthermore, as Rosenqvist (2000) urges, we need to sort out our sorting out, that is address the way we understand deviance within education systems and practices. This is an important task and one which has to replace the blanket clichés that have been associated with inclusion. An acceptance that there is no “magic solution” for inclusion, nor any recipe book for teachers to follow when they have children with additional needs of whatever kind in their classrooms will be an important step towards progress in inclusion. Children, young people and families, with direct experiences of inclusion and exclusion can help to inform and shape practice and research which seeks their perspectives will provide knowledge which will help teachers to develop their own inclusive practice. In addition, teacher education programmes which help teachers to understand and engage critically with the challenges of inclusion and diversity will do much to limit the emergence of further questions about inclusion and concerns about its future.

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