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What counts as evidence of inclusive education?

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Inclusive education has been criticized as promising more than it delivers. Artiles, Kozleski, Dorn & Christensen called it an idea that has outpaced its practice (2006, p 97), and Göransson and Nilholm's critical review of research on inclusive education concurs. As they conclude: "the operative meaning of inclusion in reviews and empirical research should be much more clearly defined and that new types of studies are needed" (xx). However, this is easier said than done. As noted by the editor of this journal some years ago, there are conceptual difficulties in defining inclusion (Hegarty, 2001) that remain unanswered. Indeed, the opening chapter of the recent *Handbook of Research on Effective Inclusive Schools* (McLeskey, Waldron, Spooner & Algozzine, 2014) begins with a commentary on the lack of agreement on how inclusive education *should* be defined. This paper considers why a clear working definition of inclusion has thus far proved elusive. It responds to Göransson and Nilholm's call for the design of the new types of studies by offering a framework designed to capture evidence of inclusive education in action.

A brief history of a complex idea.

The origins of inclusive education are rooted in special education research that questioned the efficacy of separate special education classes in the 1960s (Osgood, 2005).

Although this line of research proved inconclusive at the time, concerns about segregated education, the overrepresentation of students from minority groups in special education provision, and the stigma of labeling, were civil rights issues cogently expressed, most notably by Lloyd Dunn in his 1968 seminal article, *Special Education for the Mildly Retarded—Is Much of It Justifiable?* As Osgood noted:

Critics of special education also shared the desire to imagine, design, and ultimately implement alternative approaches to or paradigms for the education of students with disabilities that would most likely involve a fundamental restructuring not only of special education but of entire public school systems as well. By the early 1970s, many prominent educators both within and “outside” the field of special education were in open revolt against what had become an entrenched and mostly segregated system of special education. Such critiques helped shape the 1970s and beyond as a period of intense self-reflection and calls for fundamental change in the structures and practices of the field (pp 83-4).

Since this time, many definitions of inclusive education have been advanced and many efforts to effect fundamental change to the structures and practices of special education have been undertaken. Divergent definitions reflecting distinct but complementary ideas developed simultaneously in different parts of the world. Canadian advocates pioneered person-centered approaches to intervention that celebrate human difference as a resource rather than a deficit (Forest & Pearpoint, 1992), defining inclusion as ‘valuing diversity’ or “a set of principles which ensures that the student with a disability is viewed as a valued and needed member of the community” (Uditsky, 1993, p 88). In the UK, Mel Ainscow (1991) linked inclusive education to ideas of school improvement arguing for the focus of special education to shift away from differences between learners towards changing school practices. Clark, Dyson and Milward (1995) defined inclusion as “extending the scope of ordinary schools so they can include a greater diversity of children” (p v).

However, as Rouse & Florian (1997) pointed out, policies of inclusion were being developed at the same time as other school reform initiatives designed to apply the principles of the marketplace to education. The resulting ‘accountability’ and ‘standards based reform’ movements were met with apprehension by many educators not least because they feared the underlying emphasis on competition which characterized this reform agenda to be in conflict with the moral imperative of inclusion. While some raised questions about inclusion of vulnerable learners within the larger school reform movement (Slee, Tomlinson & Weiner, 1998), the study of inclusion from a school improvement perspective became firmly fixed (e.g. Ainscow, Booth & Dyson; 2006; Dyson & Milward, 2000; Thomas, Walker and Webb, 1998).

In the United States, the principle of the *least restrictive environment (LRE)*, the idea that a disabled child’s education should occur in the classroom or school he or she would have attended if not disabled led to a focus on inclusion as a place (Stainback & Stainback, 1990). And while some argued for a conceptualisation of inclusion as a service (e.g. Gartner & Lipsky, 1997), the focus of inclusive education tended towards projects that extended special education practices to the mainstream for example individualised learning and the use of learning support assistants. The idea of inclusion as special education renamed led to questions about the use of concept itself. Graham and Slee (2006) noted that ‘talk of ‘including’ can only be made by those occupying a position of privilege at the centre.’ In so doing they made it clear that by relying on what it sets out to dismantle, renaming special education practices of inclusive education inevitably colludes with rather than challenges the status quo.

While the approaches described above have been useful in disrupting traditional special education practices based on the identification of differences and separate forms of provisions for different types of learners, they have proved partial. Although person-centred approaches to inclusion represent an important advance over the deficit models of disability that aimed to fix rather than empower disabled people, they operate at the level of the individual. School improvement approaches to inclusion on the other hand have tended to ignore or minimize individual differences in favour of changing school structures. The emphasis on inclusion as a place has tended to produce research that focuses on the relocation or scaling up of special education practices in mainstream classrooms. Clearly, these three approaches to inclusion (person-centred, school improvement and special education practice) require evidence of inclusion at different levels, in this case person, classroom and school. But data are needed at multiple levels including national and supranational, regional and local, school and classroom, child and community). At the same time, information about any of these levels will be limited.

As a result, it is not surprising that reviews of inclusive education conclude that it lacks clear definition. In this regard, Göransson and Nilholm concur with reviews from elsewhere. For example, the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY, 2013), and the Irish National Council for Special Education (Winter & O'Raw, 2012) represent two recent reviews that cite the contested and problematic nature of definition. While some have become disillusioned with the lack of clarity and conceptual difficulties in defining inclusion, others have pursued various lines of research designed to explore different ideas about what inclusion means and what inclusive practices might look like. These varied conceptualisations of inclusion and inclusive education have

given rise to many different research questions, agendas and designs. It stands to reason therefore that without a defining construct, a traditional literature review looking for empirical evidence will be problematic. While it is tempting to concur that the lack of a clear definition or consensus about inclusive education is a problem, it may be that there is richness to the literature on inclusive education that has yet to be mined.

While Hegarty (op cit) warned that the conceptual difficulties in defining inclusion in education obscured the more important issue of students' learning, the idea that the meaning of inclusion would take different forms in various places depending on the situation suited the post modern spirit of the time. In the 1990's, research on the practice of inclusive education suggested that it's meaning was contextual (Katsiyannis, Conderman & Franks, 1995; O'Hanlon, 1995), and this idea was reflected in definitions that emphasized inclusive education as 'a *process*', for example, the process of increasing participation and decreasing exclusion' (Booth and Ainscow, 2002), or 'an *approach* to education embodying particular values' (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006, p. 5, emphasis added). While this distinction is helpful in differentiating inclusive education from a place, such as a mainstream school or classroom, many years of case study research has conclusively demonstrated that this process is indeed contextual and can take many forms, raising important questions about what constitutes good practice, what counts as evidence of such practice, and how it can be known. It is *because* inclusive education takes place in the varied environment of classrooms and schools that are located in a broader policy context of current educational reforms that promotes competition between schools and jurisdictions as a measure of effectiveness, that more theoretically informed work is needed

Designing a framework to evidence inclusive practice

In a recent special issue of this journal, my colleague, Jenny Spratt and I presented a framework for gathering evidence about the inclusive practice of beginning teachers (Florian & Spratt, 2013). As we noted, the framework resulted from an iterative process beginning with what been identified as principles of inclusion that had informed of a newly developed course of initial teacher education, designed to ensure that primary and secondary classroom teachers were prepared to meet the demands of inclusive education. These were based on a concept of inclusive pedagogy that reflected what we had learned from studies of experienced teachers who were able to sustain a commitment to inclusive education over time (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Black-Hawkins & Florian, 2012). As we have come to understand it, inclusive pedagogy is an approach to teaching and learning that supports teachers to respond to individual differences between learners but avoids the marginalisation that can occur when some students are treated differently. We have written extensively about the approach, showing how it is distinctive, particularly with regard to the shift in thinking that we believe characterizes it (Florian, 2014). Because we were interested in how the teachers on our course enacted the principles of inclusive pedagogy in the different school contexts in which they worked, our framework attempted to link the principles of inclusive pedagogy to the core themes of the course and observable teaching practices.

Importantly, the framework is a tool for analysis that permits the researcher move beyond a description of observable actions toward a deeper understanding of what is the ways in which teachers enact inclusive pedagogy. Rather than leading us to the kind of reductionist approach we were keen to avoid, we found that the use of the framework

helped to document the links between a theoretical idea and the enactment of it. Using the framework we were able to show how the principles of inclusive pedagogy embedded in the course manifested in the teaching practices of our students. The framework furthered our understanding of what is distinctive about the decisions made by teachers committed to inclusive pedagogy, particularly with regard what we describe as the shift in focus away from ideas of most and some learners to everybody. Subsequently an adapted version of the framework was developed (Florian, 2014) and a slightly revised version is presented in Table 1. As can be seen, the inclusive pedagogical approach in action (IPPA) framework links the principles of inclusive pedagogy with the assumptions that underpin them as we have come to understand them based on earlier work with primary and secondary classroom teachers. These are aligned with the ‘actions and challenges’ believed to facilitate and inhibit inclusive practices. In this way the complex and varied situations in which teachers find themselves can be seen as contextual information that can be subject to cross case analysis rather than confounding variables that are not subject to comparison. In the final column, guidance on pedagogical evidence (following Alexander’s 2004 notion of pedagogy as the act and discourse of teaching) is provided.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Currently we are using the Framework as a reflective tool on a Master’s level course for experienced teachers who have found the theoretical framework of inclusive pedagogy helpful in making sense of inclusion within the school setting (Spratt & Florian, in press).

Colleagues elsewhere are using the Framework to identify links between inclusive pedagogy to curricular content knowledge (Deppeler, personal communication).

Conclusion

Just as many definitions of inclusive education have been advanced, there are now attempts to take stock of these definitions. In this paper I suggested that three types of divergent definitions reflecting complementary ideas about inclusion that were developing simultaneously in different parts of the world offer an explanation for why the field is considered a conceptual muddle. Rather than give up on the search for clarity, there may be important work to do on the history of the idea and its development. Mining this history may help to bring conceptual clarity to the field.

At the same time, the popular idea that inclusion is contextual, taking different forms in different places has contributed to the problem of conceptual muddle. Yet over twenty years of research including small-scale school development projects, large-scale studies and programmes of research associated with the three types of definitions of inclusion have produced a knowledge base of sorts. We now know much more about the processes of inclusion and exclusion but the task of generating new theoretical insights to guide the development of practice remains. The IPPA Framework was developed in response to the methodological problem of context as a confounding variable. By specifying principles, assumptions, challenges and evidence, the IPPA Framework focuses on student learning and the relationships between the members of the classroom community. In this way, judgments about

what inclusion is and whether or not it has occurred are replaced by an exploration of the *extent* to which a principled stance is enacted.

What counts as evidence of inclusive education is an important question that can be partially answered by an approach to the study of teachers' practices that specifies principles, assumptions, and actions. For more than twenty years a grounded theory type of approach to understanding practice has dominated the field. The now common findings of this approach have saturated the literature. They can and should now be used to theorise practice. The IPPA Framework represents one attempt to do this.

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