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What counts as evidence of inclusive education?

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Inclusive education takes many forms, raising important questions about what constitutes good practice, what counts as evidence of such practice and how it can be known. This paper responds to Göransson and Nilholm's critical review of research on inclusive education by considering why a clear working definition of inclusion has thus far proved elusive. It agrees that new types of studies and more theoretically informed work is needed if knowledge about inclusive education is to advance. A framework designed to capture evidence of inclusive education in action is presented as an example of a tool that is both theoretically informed and can be used to transcend contextual differences to obtain a deeper understanding of the ways in which teachers enact inclusive pedagogical practices.

Keywords: inclusive education; inclusive pedagogy; research evidence; definition of inclusion

Inclusive education has been criticised as promising more than it delivers. Artiles et al. called it an idea that has outpaced its practice (2006, 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". 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 et al. 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 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 labelling were civil rights issues

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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. (83–84).

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-centred approaches to intervention that celebrate human difference as a resource rather than a deficit (Forest and 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, 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” (v).

However, as Rouse and 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 characterised 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, and Weiner 1998), the study of inclusion from a school improvement perspective became firmly fixed (e.g. Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006; Dyson and 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 and Stainback 1990). And while some argued for a conceptualisation of inclusion as a service (e.g. Lipsky and Gartner 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” (20). In so doing, they made it clear that by relying on what it sets out to dismantle, renaming special education practices as 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 minimise 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 and O’Raw 2010) 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 postmodern spirit of the time. In the 1990’s, research on the practice of inclusive education suggested that its meaning was contextual (Katsiyannis, Conderman, and Franks 1995; O’Hanlon 2003), and this idea was reflected in definitions that emphasised 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, and Dyson 2006, 5). 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 and Spratt 2013). As we noted, the framework resulted from an iterative process beginning with what had been identified as principles of inclusion that had been informed 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 (Black-Hawkins and Florian 2012; Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011). 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 characterises 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 to move beyond a description of observable actions toward a deeper understanding of what are 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 to 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 (IPAA) 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.

Currently, we are using the IPAA 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 and Florian *forthcoming*). Colleagues elsewhere are using the Framework to identify links between inclusive pedagogy to curricular content knowledge (Deppeler, personal communication).

Table 1. The inclusive pedagogical approach in action (IPAA) framework.

Assumptions	Associated concepts/actions	Key challenges	Evidence (What to look for in practice)
1. Difference is accounted for as an essential aspect of human development in any conceptualisation of learning	Replacing deterministic views of ability with those that view learning potential as open-ended	‘Bell-curve thinking’ and notions of fixed ability still underpin the structure of schooling	Teaching practices which include <i>all</i> children (everybody)
	Acceptance that differences are part of human condition		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Creating environments for learning with opportunities that are sufficiently made available for <i>everyone</i>, so that all learners are able to participate in classroom life;
	Rejecting idea that the presence of some will hold back the progress of others		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Extending what is ordinarily available for <i>all</i> learners (creating a rich learning community) rather than using teaching and learning strategies that are suitable for <i>most</i> alongside something ‘additional’ or ‘different’ for <i>some</i> who experience difficulties;
	Believing that all children can make progress		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• differentiation achieved through choice of activity for everyone
			Rejection of ability grouping as main or sole organisation of working groups Use of language which expresses the value of all children Focusing teaching and learning on what children can do rather than what they cannot Social constructivist approaches, e.g. providing opportunities for children to co-construct knowledge (participation), Use of formative assessment to support learning.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Assumptions	Associated concepts/actions	Key challenges	Evidence (What to look for in practice)
2. Teachers must believe they are qualified/capable of teaching all children	Demonstrating how the difficulties students experience in learning can be considered dilemmas for teaching rather than problems within students	The identification of difficulties in learning and the associated focus on what the learner <i>cannot</i> do often puts a ceiling on learning and achievement.	Focus on <i>what</i> is to be taught (and <i>how</i>) rather than <i>who</i> is to learn it. Providing opportunities for children to choose (rather than pre-determine) the level at which they engage with lessons Strategic/reflective responses to support difficulties which children encounter in their learning
	Commitment to the support of all learners. Belief in own capacity to promote learning for all children	Many teachers believe some learners are not their responsibility	Quality of relationships between teacher and learner Interest in the welfare of the 'whole child' not simply the acquisition of knowledge and skills Flexible approach – driven by needs of learners rather than 'coverage' of material Seeing difficulties in learning as professional challenges for teachers, rather than deficits in learners.
3. Teachers continually develop creative new ways of working with others	Willingness to work (creatively) with and through others	Changing thinking about inclusion from 'most' and 'some' to everybody	Interplay between personal / professional stance and the stance of the school – creating spaces for inclusion wherever possible <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking and trying out new ways of working to support the learning of all children; • Working with and through other adults in ways that respect the dignity of learners as full members of the community of the classroom;

(Continued)

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Assumptions	Associated concepts/actions	Key challenges	Evidence (What to look for in practice)
			<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Being committed to continuing professional development as a way of developing more inclusive practices.
	Modelling (creative new) ways of working		In partnerships formed with teachers or other adults who work alongside them in the classroom Through discussions with other teachers / other professionals outside the classroom

Source: adapted from Florian 2014 and Florian and Spratt 2013.

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 20 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 IPAA Framework was developed in response to the methodological problem of context as a confounding variable. By specifying principles, assumptions, challenges and evidence, the IPAA Framework focuses on student learning and the relationships between the members of the classroom community. In this way, judgements 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 20 years, a grounded theory type of approach to understand 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 IPAA Framework represents one attempt to do this.

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