Inclusion and equity in education: Making sense of global challenges

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Abstract   This article provides an introductory commentary to the papers in this *Prospects* special issue on inclusive education. In so doing, it stresses the need to be cautious as we read accounts of inclusive education from other parts of the world: whilst lessons can undoubtedly be learned from the accounts in this special issue, they must be adopted with care. There is no doubt that evidence of various kinds can help in identifying the barriers facing some learners and the resources that can be used to overcome these difficulties. However, efforts to promote inclusion and equity within education systems should be based on an analysis of particular contexts. To that end, this article outlines a research-based framework that can be used to carry out such contextual analyses. The article concludes by arguing that an emphasis on inclusion and equity can potentially improve the quality of education for all young people within a national education system.

Keywords   Inclusion · Equity · Contextual analysis

The articles in this special issue of *Prospects* provide fascinating insights into how the global concern to promote inclusion and equity is influencing education policies and practices around the world. In their accounts, the authors shed light on the challenges involved, as well as suggesting ways of addressing these difficulties.

In this introductory commentary, I reflect on these accounts in light of my own experience of developing research protocols to support inclusive developments in many parts of the world. This leads me to suggest several factors that need to be addressed in order to move policies and practices forward. I also underline the importance of contextual factors in shaping the results of education system reform. I argue that this concern with context should be kept in mind, particularly when reading this special issue.

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Contexts and perspectives

Despite 25 years of international debate, consensus on inclusive education remains elusive (Ainscow 2020). Internationally, it is increasingly seen as a principle that supports and welcomes diversity amongst all learners (UNESCO 2017). This view presumes that the aim is to eliminate social exclusion resulting from discriminatory attitudes about race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender, and ability. As such, it starts from the belief that education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just society. An emphasis on equity was recently introduced by the Education 2030 Framework for Action (UNESCO 2015), which implies a concern with fairness. In the *Guide for Ensuring Inclusion and Equity in Education* that I helped develop with a team of international experts, we summed this up as follows: *every learner matters and matters equally* (UNESCO 2017).

Differences of perspective regarding what all of this involves are apparent in the accounts of developments included in this special issue of *Prospects*. We see, for example, that some of the authors focus mainly on finding ways to serve particular groups of children within general education settings—such as children with disabilities or from minority backgrounds—or on how gender affects inclusion. Similarly, most of the articles address learners from low-income families. On the other hand, some of the authors see inclusion more broadly, as a guiding principle. To varying degrees, their perspectives are informed by the intersectional lens explained by Edvina Bešić in this issue. This focuses attention on how the interconnected nature of social categorisations, such as race, class, and gender, leads to discriminatory processes.

These varied perspectives also remind us, in case we forget, that when it comes to understanding and developing education policies and practices, *context matters*. This means that it is dangerous to make assumptions about what is happening in another country based on experiences in one's own country.

Learning from differences

The articles show that there are many sources of inequity in education, related to political, economic, social, cultural, and institutional factors and that these factors vary both within and across countries. This means that whilst lessons can undoubtedly be learned from all the accounts, they must be interpreted and replicated with care. To take a specific example, Fullan (2007) notes that Finland has no system of national testing but, he argues, this does not mean that the absence of testing is always a good thing.

System change strategies being contextually sensitive is one of the pervading themes in the suggestions I make in this article. To illustrate what this means, I return to a book published over 20 years ago, in which my colleague Tony Booth and I analysed the perspectives on inclusion (and exclusion) revealed by members of a team of researchers, in their accounts of schools in eight countries (Booth and Ainscow 1998). The study arose from our dissatisfaction with much of the existing comparative education research, much of which sought findings that would have global significance by oversimplifying educational processes and practices, and by ignoring problems of interpretation and translation. We were also concerned about studies that assumed the existence of a single national perspective, rather than reporting the conflicts of interest and points of view

that arise in all countries. In these ways, we argued that important differences between and within countries are too often omitted from study and debate.

Given these concerns, we intended for our study of developments in the eight countries to enhance interest in the shaping effect of national and local policies, as well as cultural and linguistic histories, on educational practice. It would do this, we hoped, by extending existing comparative reviews of inclusion through making their viewpoints explicit and illustrating practice in all its messiness. We also set out to challenge the way notions of inclusive education are often interpreted through the narrow, deficit lens of traditional special education.

Booth and I argued that an awareness of viewpoint diversity would avoid two pitfalls of comparative research: the idea that, in any country, there is a single national perspective on inclusion; and the notion that practice can be generalised across countries without attention to local contexts and meanings. The tendency to present single national perspectives, we explained, is often matched by a failure to describe the way practice is to be understood in its local and national context. This is part of a positivist view of social science, in which research carried out in one country can be amalgamated with that of others in order to support generalisable conclusions.

All of this is in marked contrast to the studies we read in this special issue of *Prospects*: to varying degrees and in different ways, these studies attempt to draw out nuances of the meaning of policy and practice in particular countries. In some cases, this means listening directly to the voices of those involved, not least those of children and young people. Rather than reducing the potential contribution of research conducted in unfamiliar contexts, careful analysis of these differences in perspective, context, and meaning enhances their value.

Learning from experience

As a consultant to UNESCO over the last 30 years or so, I have had the privilege of working with colleagues in many countries, using research to foster greater inclusion and equity within education systems. I call the approach I have developed in carrying out this work "collaborative inquiry" (Ainscow 1999). Put simply, it involves stakeholders in generating and engaging with evidence to inform their efforts.

Based on the adage that the best way to understand an organisation is by trying to change it, my experiences have shed light on the factors that can facilitate or limit the progress of inclusive education. These experiences led me to formulate a framework for thinking about how to promote inclusion and equity within education systems (see Figure 1). Amended from an earlier version (Ainscow 2005), the framework places schools at the centre of the analysis. This reinforces the point that moves towards inclusion must focus on increasing the capacity of local neighbourhood mainstream schools to support the participation and learning of an increasingly diverse range of learners. This is the paradigm shift that I have previously described as an "inclusive turn" (Ainscow 2007). There, I argued that moves towards inclusion are about the development of schools, rather than attempts to integrate vulnerable groups of students into existing arrangements.

At the same time, the framework draws attention to a range of contextual factors that bear on the way schools carry out their work: (1) the principles that guide policy priorities within an education system, (2) the criteria used to evaluate the performance of schools, and (3) the views and actions of others within the local context, including members of
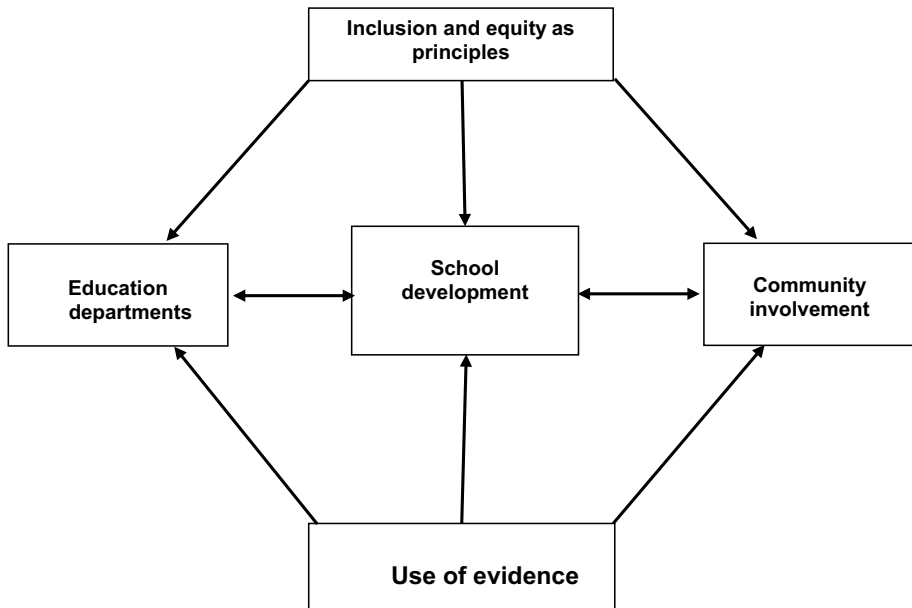
Figure 1 A framework for contextual analysis in relation to inclusion and equity

the wider community that the schools serve, and the staff of national and local education departments responsible for the coordination of the education system. As I will explain, these influences may provide support and encouragement to those in schools who wish to move in an inclusive direction. However, they can also act as obstacles to progress.

In what follows, each of these five factors is explained, leading to a series of key ideas to consider when analysing a particular context in order to develop future policies. These ideas are guided by a belief that inclusion and equity should not be seen as separate policies. Rather, they should be viewed as principles that inform all national education policies, particularly those that deal with the curriculum, assessment, supervision, school evaluation, teacher education, and budgets. They must also inform all stages of education, from early years through to higher education.

Inclusion and equity as principles

Terms such as "equity" and "inclusion" can be confusing since they may mean different things to different people. This is a particular problem when trying to move forward with others—particularly in schools, where everybody is so busy. Put simply, if there is not a shared understanding of the intended direction of travel, progress will be more difficult. There is, therefore, a need to agree on definitions of these concepts.

In establishing a definition for strategic purposes, our earlier research (Ainscow et al. 2006) led us to suggest that inclusion in education should be:

- *Seen as a process.* Inclusion has to be seen as a never-ending search to find better ways of responding to diversity. It is about learning how to live with difference and learning how to learn from difference. In this way, differences come to be seen more positively as a stimulus for fostering learning, amongst both children and adults.

- *Concerned with the identification and removal of barriers.* It involves collecting, collating, and evaluating information from a wide variety of sources within particular contexts, in order to plan for improvements in policy and practice. It is also about using evidence of various kinds to stimulate creativity and problem-solving.
- *Focused on improving the presence, participation, and achievement of all students.* Here, presence is concerned with where children are educated, and with how reliably and punctually they attend; participation relates to the quality of their experiences whilst they are there and thus must incorporate the views of the learners themselves; and achievement is about the outcomes of learning across the curriculum, not merely test or examination results.
- *Involve a particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalisation, exclusion, or underachievement.* This indicates the moral responsibility to ensure that those groups that are statistically most at risk are carefully monitored, and that, where necessary, steps are taken to ensure their presence, participation, and achievement within the education system. At the same time, there is a need to keep an eye out for learners who may be overlooked.

My experience is that a well-orchestrated debate about these elements can lead to a wider understanding of the principle of inclusion. Though such debate is by its nature slow and possibly eternal, it can help foster the conditions within which schools can feel encouraged to move in a more inclusive direction. Crucially, this process must seek to involve all stakeholders, including families, communities, political and religious leaders, and the media. It must also involve those within national and local education district offices.

The use of evidence

In order to address concerns about access and equity in education systems, it is important to know who is included, who is segregated, and who is excluded from schooling. Without such evidence, there can be no accountability. However, when data collection efforts are only focused on particular categories of learners, there is a risk of promoting deficit views of students who share certain characteristics or come from similar backgrounds. Put simply, the focus is on what is wrong with the child, rather than more fundamental questions, such as *why are we failing some learners* or *what are the barriers experienced by some of our students*.

Engaging with evidence regarding these challenging questions, including the views of children and their families, has the potential to stimulate efforts to find more effective ways of promoting the participation and progress of all learners (Ainscow and Messiou 2017). Data on contextual factors are also needed, including resources and facilities, and on attitudes, beliefs, and social relationships. With the growing technological capacity to handle large amounts of different types of data, it is increasingly possible to generate information about the many influences that affect the inclusion, segregation, and exclusion of students within education systems. Focusing on these factors can help create the conditions for promoting inclusion and equity.

With this in mind, I suggest a different way of responding to learner diversity, one that views it in relation to barriers that exist within a given context, and to opportunities to enhance and democratise learning opportunities, processes, and outcomes. This leads me to argue that the extent to which students' experiences are inclusive and equitable is not only dependent on the educational practices of their schools. Instead, it depends on a whole range of interacting processes that reach into the school from outside. These include the

demographics of the areas served by schools, the histories and cultures of the populations who send (or fail to send) their children to a school, and the economic and social realities faced by those populations.

It is therefore helpful to generate evidence that addresses three interlinked sets of factors that impact the participation and learning of students: *within-school factors* such as existing policies and practices, *between-school factors* that arise from the characteristics of local school systems, and *beyond-school factors*, including the demographics, economics, cultures, and histories of local areas—all with a focus on reducing inequalities. We have defined this simple framework as "an ecology of equity" (Ainscow et al. 2012).

School development

There is no single model of what an inclusive school looks like. What is common to highly inclusive schools, however, is that they are welcoming and supportive places for all of their students, not least those with disabilities and others who sometimes find learning difficult. This does not prevent these schools from being committed to improving the achievements of all of their students. Indeed, they tend to have a range of strategies for strengthening achievements that are typical of those employed by all effective schools, and an emphasis on supporting vulnerable students does not appear to inhibit these strategies (Dyson et al. 2004). A key factor is the emphasis placed on tracking and supporting the progress of all students.

The implication is that schools need to be reformed and practices need to be improved in ways that will lead them to respond positively to student diversity: seeing individual differences not as problems to be fixed but as opportunities for enriching learning. Within such a conceptualisation, considering students' difficulties can provide an agenda for change and insights into how such changes might be brought about. Moreover, this kind of approach is more likely to be successful in contexts where there is a culture of collaboration that encourages and supports problem-solving (Ainscow 2016b; Skrtic 1991). According to this view, the development of inclusive practices is seen as involving those within a particular context in working together to address barriers to education experienced by some learners.

This means that attempts to develop inclusive schools should pay attention to the building of consensus around inclusive values within school communities. It implies that school leaders should be selected in the light of their commitment to inclusive values and their capacity to lead in a participatory manner (Riehl 2000). Finally, the external policy environment should be compatible with inclusive developments, in order to support rather than to undermine schools' efforts.

Involving the wider community

In order to foster inclusion and equity in education, governments need to mobilise human and financial resources, some of which may not be under their direct control. Forming partnerships amongst key stakeholders who can support the process of change is therefore essential. These stakeholders include: parents/caregivers; teachers and other education professionals; teacher trainers and researchers; national, local, and school-level administrators and managers; policy-makers and service providers in other sectors (e.g., health, child protection, and social services); civic groups in the community; and members of minority groups that are at risk of exclusion.

Family involvement is particularly crucial. In some countries, parents and education authorities already cooperate closely in developing community-based programmes for certain groups of learners, such as those who are excluded because of their gender, social status, or impairments (Miles 2002). A logical next step is for families to become involved in supporting change for developing inclusion in schools.

Where parents lack the confidence or skills to participate in such developments, it might be necessary to engage and build capacity and networks. This could include the creation of parent support groups, training parents to work with their children, or building the advocacy skills of parents to negotiate with schools and authorities. Here, it is worth adding that there is evidence that the views of families, including children themselves, can be helpful in energising the efforts of schools to develop more inclusive ways of working.

All of this means changing how families and communities work and enriching what they offer to children. In this respect, there are many encouraging examples of what can happen when what schools do is aligned in a coherent strategy with the efforts of other local players—employers, community groups, universities, and public services (Kerr et al. 2014). This does not necessarily mean schools doing more, but it does imply partnerships beyond the school, where partners multiply the impacts of each other's efforts.

With this argument in mind, my Manchester colleagues Alan Dyson and Kirstin Kerr have explored the idea of area-based initiatives, modelled on the principles underpinning the highly acclaimed Harlem Children's Zone in the USA (Dyson and Kerr 2013). This work involves attempts to improve outcomes for children and young people in areas of disadvantage, through an approach characterised as "doubly holistic". That is to say, it seeks to develop coordinated efforts to tackle the factors that disadvantage children and enhance the factors which support them, across all aspects of their lives and across their life spans, from conception through to adulthood.

All of this has implications for the various key stakeholders within education systems. In particular teachers, especially those in senior positions, have to see themselves as having a wider responsibility for all children, not just those who attend their own schools. They also have to develop patterns of internal organisation that enable them to have the flexibility to cooperate with other schools and with stakeholders beyond the school gate. It means, too, that those who administer school systems have to adjust their priorities and ways of working, in response to improvement efforts led from within schools.

Education departments

Policy is made at all levels of an education system, not least at the school and classroom levels (Ainscow et al. 2020). Furthermore, the promotion of equity and inclusion is not simply a technical or organisational change—it is a movement in a clear philosophical direction. Moving to more inclusive ways of working therefore requires changes across an education system. These span from shifts in policy-makers' values and ways of thinking, which enable them to provide a vision shaping a culture of inclusion, to significant changes within schools and the communities they serve.

A culture of inclusion within an education system requires a shared set of assumptions and beliefs amongst senior staff at the national, district, and school level that value differences, believe in collaboration, and are committed to offering educational opportunities to all students. However, changing the cultural norms that exist within an education system is difficult to achieve, particularly within a context that is faced with so many competing pressures and where practitioners tend to work alone in addressing the problems they face. Therefore, leaders at all levels, including those in civil society and other sectors, have to

be prepared to analyse their own situations, identify local barriers and facilitators, plan an appropriate development process, and provide support for inclusive practices and effective strategies for monitoring equity in education.

National and district administrators have particularly important roles in promoting inclusive ways of managing schools and education processes. In particular, they need to establish the conditions for challenging non-inclusive, discriminatory educational practices. They also need to build consensus and commitment towards putting the principle of inclusion into practice.

There is also evidence that school-to-school collaboration can strengthen the capacity of individual organisations to respond to learner diversity (Ainscow 2016a; Muijs et al. 2011). Specifically, collaboration between schools can help reduce the polarisation of schools, to the particular benefit of those students who are marginalised at the edges of the system. In addition, when schools seek to develop more collaborative ways of working, this can have an impact on how teachers perceive themselves and their work (Rosenholtz 1989). Specifically, comparisons of practices in different schools can lead teachers to view underachieving students in a new light. In this way, learners who cannot easily be educated within the school's established routines are not seen as "having problems", but as challenging teachers to re-examine their practices to make them more responsive and flexible.

Local coordination is therefore needed in order to encourage this form of area-based collaboration. Here, it is significant that a recent study found that four of the most successful national education systems—Estonia, Finland, Ontario (Canada), and Singapore—all have well-developed systems for coordinating local school districts, regardless of their differing extents of school autonomy or devolution of decision-making (Bubb et al. 2019). In particular, they all have district-level structures that seek to ensure equity as well as excellence.

All of this points to the importance of how financial resources are allocated within education systems. This can be crucial in creating the flexibility within schools to encourage the sorts of experimentation I have described. Alternatively, it can lead to further segregation, with resources used to provide separate attention for some students—within the school or in separate special schools or classes. In this sense, finance is another powerful lever for change (Meijer and Watkins 2019).

Drawing the lessons

In summary, then, I have learned five key lessons about promoting equity and inclusion:

- Policies should be based on clear and widely understood definitions of what the terms *equity* and *inclusion* mean.
- Strategies should be informed by evidence regarding the impact of current practices on the presence, participation, and achievement of all students.
- There should be an emphasis on whole-school approaches, in which teachers are supported in developing inclusive practices.
- Policies should draw on the experience and expertise of everybody who has an involvement in the lives of children, including families and the children themselves.
- Education departments, locally and nationally, must provide leadership in the promotion of equity and inclusion as principles that guide the work of teachers in all schools.

It is encouraging that similar ideas are presented in the GEM 2020 Report, which is summarised in this issue of *Prospects*. They indicate that the promotion of inclusion and equity in education is less about the introduction of particular techniques or new organisational arrangements, and much more about the processes of social learning within particular contexts. As such, it requires a culture of inclusion to permeate the education system. It is, therefore, likely to involved a radical challenge to existing thinking within education systems.

Making this happen will require powerful change strategies. And, as I have stressed throughout this article, such strategies have to be developed in particular contexts by analysing evidence that clarifies the barriers experienced by learners. At the same time, this form of analysis is likely to identify resources—particularly human resources—that can be mobilised to address these difficulties.

All of this has major implications for leadership practice within schools and across educational systems, which must be ethics-based (Harris et al. 2017). In particular, it calls for coordinated and sustained efforts around the idea that outcomes for vulnerable groups of students are unlikely to change unless there are changes in the attitudes and behaviours of adults. Consequently, the starting point must be those adults: enlarging their capacity to imagine what might be achieved, then increasing their sense of accountability for bringing it about. This may also involve tackling taken-for-granted assumptions, most often relating to expectations about certain groups of students, their capabilities, and their behaviours.

Reaching out to all learners

Those involved in advancing this radical agenda for change may find it helpful to look at the resource pack *Reaching Out to All Learners*, which I developed with colleagues at UNESCO's International Bureau of Education (available free at: http://www.ibe.unesco.org/sites/default/files/resources/ibe-crp-inclusiveeducation-2016_eng.pdf). Drawing on international research evidence of the sort I have mentioned in this article, these materials are intended to influence and support inclusive thinking and practices at all levels of an education system. Consequently, they are designed to be relevant to teachers, school leaders, district-level administrators, teacher educators, and national policy makers.

The resource pack is intended to be used flexibly, in response to contexts that are at different stages of development and where resources vary. With this in mind, it emphasises active learning processes, within which those who use the materials are encouraged to work collaboratively, helping one another to review and develop their thinking and practices. Extensive use is made of examples from different parts of the world, to encourage the development of new ways to reach out to all learners. In this way, inclusion and equity are seen as pathways to the overall improvement of education systems.

This issue of *Prospects*

As I have argued, policy is made at all levels of an education system. It is appropriate, therefore, that the articles in this special issue on inclusive education probe deeply into the developments and challenges that the authors encountered as they analysed particular contexts around the world.

Starting at a macro level, Maha Khochen-Bagshaw uses her lived experiences as an international consultant to write about progress across the Middle East and North Africa, Umesh Sharma examines developments in the Pacific region, and Ignacio Calderón-Almendros and his colleagues analyse challenges and opportunities in Latin America. Each of these articles throw light on patterns that are evident across countries that share cultural, religious, and linguistic similarities. At the same time, they warn that such similarities should not prevent us from looking more closely at what happens within countries. This reminds us that policies are influenced by national histories.

Some of the articles focus on the role of policy within contexts that are seen as being at the vanguard of progress in relation to inclusion and equity. For example, Dario Ianes and his colleagues explain how the Italian government passed a law in 1977 that closed all special schools, units, and other non-inclusive provisions. Whilst thinking and practice varies from place to place within Italy, the principle of inclusion is widely accepted. The province of New Brunswick in Canada is frequently quoted as an example of a system that has pioneered the concept of inclusive education through legislation, local authority policies, and professional guidelines. In their account, Angela AuCoin, Gordon Porter, and Kimberly Korotkov explain that change has been a difficult process, requiring long periods of sustained effort and collaboration amongst a variety of stakeholders and partners. Meanwhile, the article on Portugal by Ines Alves and her colleagues explains how recent legislation requires that the provision of supports for all students be determined, managed, and provided at the regular school level, developed with local multidisciplinary teams.

Other articles examine how political factors have influenced progress in relation to inclusion and equity. This is particularly evident in Petra Engelbrecht's analysis of developments in South Africa, which, she explains, have to be understood in relation to broader political, social, and cultural developments since the end of Apartheid. In their account of developments in Australia, Christopher Boyle and Joanna Anderson argue that current reform agendas situate inclusive education *against*, rather than alongside, other prevailing policies. And in their analysis of current developments in another Canadian province, Nova Scotia, Jess Whitley and Trista Hollweck explain how the inclusion agenda has broadened to focus on all students, particularly those most often marginalised by and within school systems.

Some of the articles take us closer to the action in the field, using accounts of the experiences of individual learners. In discussing the limitations inherent in the policy framework in the USA, Doug Biklen draws on autobiographical accounts of students with disabilities. He concludes that, nationally, inclusion is uneven and is much less available for students of colour, immigrant youth, and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. In their account of what they call "street-connected young people" in Kenya, Su Corcoran and her colleagues draw attention to a group of learners who are too often overlooked.

Finally, a strength of all of the articles is the way that authors relate their arguments to relevant international literature, whilst at the same time drawing attention to local sources. This provides a rich source of further information for readers. In addition, the article by Anthoula Kefallinou and her colleagues at the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education offers helpful advice on using research evidence to understand the why and how of inclusive education, whilst Edvina Bešić explains the relevance of the idea of intersectionality.

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