

Inclusive education in progress: policy evolution in four European countries

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(Received 31 December 2013; accepted 15 April 2014)

This paper seeks to compare the evolution of inclusive education policy in the four countries of an EU-funded research project (QualiTYDES) operating under the shared policy environment of the UN, EU and European Commission. A shared policy cannot of course be assumed to result in common legislative or provisional outcomes at national level. The different sociocultural, political, historical and economic contexts in each country shape its journey towards ‘compliance’ with an international convention (both pre- and post-ratification), and neither the route nor the destination can be assumed to be shared, given the scope for different interpretations of the same texts. This paper places the implementation trajectories of four European countries side by side as they attempt to move towards ‘inclusive’ education systems. Following a brief overview of the international education policy environment relating to the education of people with disabilities, we describe the national education policy responses in Ireland, Austria, Spain and Czech Republic in recent decades, including both legislation pertaining to special educational need and implementation of policies in practice. The comparison highlights the different manifestations of inclusive education current in each country, and also explores the challenges which have arisen as individual countries attempt to align international policy with provision in existing education systems, each with their own legacy interests, pressures and priorities. Examples of ‘gaps’ in this alignment are where learners with disabilities/SEN are likely to be failed, and represent the critical points at which barriers to fully inclusive education arise and negatively impact opportunity over the life course.

Keywords: education policy; policy comparison; provision comparison; inclusive education; special needs education

Introduction

In special education research to date, there has been a broad interest in policies on inclusive education and a number of studies have attempted to compare how countries address, develop and implement inclusion policies in education (EADSNE 2011; Richardson and Powell 2011; Strangvik 2010). The attractions of comparison

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