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Enhancing Sustainable Inclusive Education

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Editorial

Enhancing Sustainable Inclusive Education

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, inclusive education has been the focal point of many international declarations related to children's and young people's educational rights. It is an integral part of the societal democratic development spread out in many countries. However, previous research on inclusive education shows that there are multiple interpretations of inclusive education [1–3]. Some researchers have even questioned the reliability of inclusive education, arguing that it is negligently defined (e.g., [4,5]) or maybe too difficult to define [6] at the policy level [7] and essentially at the practical level [8,9].

Nevertheless, the gap between the goals and the practice of inclusive education do not diminish the need for further studies. On the contrary, the problems in defining and developing the conceptual frames for inclusive education increase the demand for more research to achieve a broader understanding. The state of the art in the research field of inclusive education was embodied in our call for the special issue about sustainable inclusive education. The call was inviting and produced a large number of diverse, interdisciplinary, and interesting research manuscripts. This shows that inclusive education is a highly topical issue in education. Within this field, researchers aim to develop the conceptual frameworks and research-based practical implementations of inclusive education despite its slippery nature.

There are several elements of inclusive education that make it difficult to characterize, to get a grip on in research, and thus, to develop research-based implementations for the practice level. Perhaps the most important element of inclusive education is the fact that it involves the school system as a whole, a system where all parts effect each other through the relations between them [10]. The school system is composed of four interconnected levels: national/regional, community, school, and individual levels with the learner placed at the center of the system [11]. At each level there are policies, procedures, and actors that have a role and a responsibility in creating inclusive schools and school systems. There are educational policies at the national and local levels, as well as at the school level, and each classroom teacher creates their own practices and pedagogies. The whole community around schools is involved when implementing inclusive education. All those working in schools are interconnected in the community, from the pupils and students and their families to the teachers, teaching assistants, and professionals working in the student health and welfare services.

Research can examine inclusive education at these various levels and investigate how they interact. For example, the structure of a school's support system and its applications may be explored [12]. There, the professional networks and their nature are essential [13]. The research may investigate the phenomenon from different points of views; for example, from the angle of teachers' professional actions [14,15] or pupils' and students' personal experiences [16]. As an example, Qvortrup & Qvortrup [17] look at inclusive education from physical, social, and psychological points of view. They do not take communities as one entity but identify various smaller arenas inside the communities, in which inclusion may appear in diverse levels. Furthermore, an individual student may feel socially included to one or two friends at school but unable to relate to the whole class as a community [17].

It is inevitable that, for research purposes, the focus of each study needs to be defined in a scale in which some of the characteristics may be captured. The researchers need to acknowledge the societal and social context in which the investigation happens. In addition, the potential vulnerability of the participants and the ethical dimensions of the study [18] must be considered when carrying out a study about inclusive education.

Based on the above-mentioned framework, we started our task as academic editors for the special issue of sustainable inclusive education. In the call for the special issue, we stated our "interest in papers that identify and analyze inclusive or exclusive perceptions, practices, pedagogies, and structures in different contexts and aim to change unequal power relations wherever people meet, work, and study. The perspectives may be taken at different levels of the education system, ranging from the micro level to societal structures as well as inclusive teacher education. The approach in the articles addressed to the Special Issue may also be multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral, addressing how different disciplines and sectors can be brought together to develop inclusive education systems at the school, local, regional, or national levels. We welcome all types of research including quantitative and qualitative approaches, case studies, reviews, and multimethod research."

The number of submitted manuscripts surprised us. There were very many researchers who contacted the journal with their studies. Our aim was to take an inclusive stance by taking care that we were not pre-judgmental, and we welcomed research that had various interpretations of inclusive education, as long as the research design and process were clearly and logically presented and followed the ethical research guidelines. In the end, there were 63 authors from 18 countries who published their research results in our special issue. Altogether, there are 17 articles representing the sustainable inclusive education in this issue.

2. Synopsis of the Articles

In our special issue, the studies focused on diverse research participants. The most popular target groups were children and young people. The researchers explored school students at all age levels; six studies researched students from primary to secondary schools, and one paper focused on students in higher vocational education. The studies included both children and young people with special education needs (SEN) or sometimes without SEN. One study dealt with young immigrants' problems. There were two studies that examined parents' views concerning inclusive education and experiences concerning their children with SEN during the COVID-19 pandemic. Four studies explored in-service teachers or teacher educators, and two studies were interested in pre-service teachers. Finally, one study had a different view of inclusive education as it explored the research literature written about inclusive education. This interesting research was conducted using a bibliometric analysis.

The most common methodology employed in the studies was statistical analysis. Clearly, there is a need to develop measures with which various stakeholders' perceptions, experiences, and conceptions can be reliably explored. There were four studies that aimed to validate a survey concerning some elements of inclusive education; for example, parents' views of the methods by which their children were receiving inclusive education at school or teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education. Another issue that was explored with various methods addressed the pedagogical approaches that enhance all students' learning possibilities; another was teacher competence on inclusive education. Among these pedagogical applications, there were courses that were designed to enhance pre-service teachers' self-efficacy on inclusive education—for example, a universal design for learning model and a multiple intelligence theory implemented in science teaching—while some courses utilized technology that enabled diverse students to access the material despite their potential learning difficulties. In all of these studies, it was crucial to be aware of and show the dependency of the research context on the surrounding societal and social circumstances. When these surveys or pedagogical applications are implemented, the results will be valid only in similar educational cultures. The pedagogical approaches

were tested by intervention study designs, such as experiment–control groups, by mixed methods research, or by measuring the change in participants' experiences of the explored matter. Purely qualitative methods were used in two studies. They were both conducted in transnational settings, identifying the professional dilemmas that educators encounter and the ways in which the support for diverse students in heterogeneous classes is provided.

3. Conclusions

Acting as academic editor of the special issue of Inclusive Education and Sustainability has been an interesting and inspiring journey for us in many ways, including at the personal and professional levels. We were surprised by the wide interest towards our issue topic as well as by the wide variety of interpretations provided to inclusive education in the proposed studies. Reading a wide range of studies trained us to review the general guidelines for good research practices in the proposals. By detecting the ways researchers had identified the limitations of their studies, and how they considered the reliability, validity, and credibility of their studies, we could ensure that the selected articles would provide broad and meaningful learning outcomes for our readers.

According to the United Nations [19] Sustainable Development Goal 4, it is our responsibility to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." Still, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the world-wide prognosis of children receiving education shows that over 200 million children and young people will be out of school in 2030. After the pandemic, the prognosis has become even worse [20]. Spreading out the idea of inclusive education and enhancing the participation, learning, and agency of all learners in their learning community [21] will without doubt affect the beliefs, attitudes, and values of people. Moreover, considering the contribution of the researchers in our issue, the usefulness of the results and the practical applications developed by research will certainly have a positive impact to "ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all" [19].

The carefully chosen studies in this issue show that there is an urgent need to continuously develop the contents and understanding of inclusive education. What would be a better way of developing it in a sustainable manner than research?

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