Special Issue on 'Inclusive Education': An Introduction

By Leda Kamenopoulou[*]

It is an honour to have been invited to be the guest editor for this special edition of the Athens Journal of Education, which is focused on 'Inclusive Education'. The present issue is the result of a special interest workshop organised as part of Atiner's 18th Annual International Conference on Education that took place in Athens, Greece in May 2016. The workshop was set against the backdrop of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and more specifically goal number 4, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all (UN, 2015). The workshop's aim was to explore progress made and challenges remaining with respect to ensuring access to education, especially for some of the most disadvantaged learners. The workshop included talks from researchers of different educational backgrounds and a panel discussion involving all participants, who were academics from both global South and North countries. For this special issue, we selected research papers presented at the workshop, as well as articles submitted after a special call for papers, published shortly afterwards. Each of the five articles included in this special issue has been through a rigorous double peer review process, and focuses on a theme linked to the success of inclusive education, namely, policy and legislation, special pedagogies, inclusive practices, and teacher preparation and training.

The first article, written by Carnovali, examines the right to inclusive education for persons with disabilities stipulated in Italian legislation, and it identifies a recurring problem associated with inclusive education in many countries, namely, the mismatch between policy and practice (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015; Watkins & Meijer, 2016). The author demonstrates that a country's legislative framework, which enshrines the right of disabled people to education, can be second to none -hence in theory inclusive education may well be central in a country's agenda on paper-, but that in reality its implementation can be far from straight forward. The author moreover highlights some common problems of implementation such as the unclear distribution of responsibilities amongst national and local authorities, which results in the adoption of different approaches by different regions and consequently the unequal treatment of disabled people: the respect or not of their fundamental human rights depending on their area of residence; unclear roles between general and special education teachers, and educational strategies that perpetuate exclusion within an inclusive school system. The author closes by critically discussing the key aspects of an educational reform considered by the Italian Government in order to help bridge the policy-practice gap.

The second article written by Agrillo et al. again concerns Italy, but focuses on practice and more specifically on a strategy for working with a specific area

[*] Senior Lecturer in Special and Inclusive Education, School of Education, University of Roehampton, London, UK.

of need, i.e. Visual Impairment (VI). The authors describe an intervention for teaching both VI and sighted children, and remind us that difference does not have to mean deficiency. The 'Colour Workshops' intervention, based on the principle of brain vicariance, suggests that the same goal (in this case, experiencing colour) can be reached by different means (in this case, senses other than sight). Agrillo et al. begin with a useful historical overview of the inclusion of pupils with a sensory impairment in Italy. The authors agree with Carnovali in concluding that despite recent progress in legislation, there are problems with the implementation of the law, meaning that VI pupils face many barriers in accessing education and that schools struggle when trying to include these pupils. This article brings added value to the field of inclusive education, because it demonstrates that by using *'the visually-impaired pupils' sensory vicariances as a teaching strategy and resource'*, teachers can foster inclusion of VI pupils by taking advantage of *'the pupils' diverse abilities'* (Agrillo et al.). Mintz & Wyse (2015) remind us that some knowledge of specialised strategies is necessary for teachers to be able to include certain groups of pupils with very specific needs. Despite the necessity of specialised strategies as part of an inclusive teacher's repertoire, many authors have highlighted the tension between perceiving inclusive education as concerning only some groups of children such as the disabled, as opposed to concerning all children (Stubbs, 2008; Kamenopoulou, Buli-Holmberg & Siska, 2015; Messiou, 2016; Kamenopoulou & Dukpa, 2017).

The need for greater acknowledgement of diversity within a given classroom- rather than maintaining the focus on specific disabilities- is stressed by the third article, written by Ferrante. This article again focuses on practice, but in the sense of inclusive provision more generally instead of special pedagogies. The author reports on an action research exploring the experience of one school in Malta in including disabled learners, with particular focus on teaching teams as a strategy for greater collaboration between teachers and Learning Support Assistants (LSAs). In terms of the teacher-LSA collaboration, although clearly defined roles for both emerged as a positive factor, what was mostly needed was a clearer understanding of the role of the LSA. Moreover, in this school LSAs sometimes delivered support by segregation (i.e. withdrawal from class for one to one interventions), in which case they were seen as not 100% supportive of the teacher or class. These findings resonate with results from much larger studies conducted in the UK, which have demonstrated that there is an urgent need for schools to seriously reconsider the ways in which they deploy support staff (Webster, Blatchford & Russell, 2013). On the other hand, paired work and group work were found to have a positive influence for both disabled and non-disabled peers, and the latter were another important source of support, i.e. another inclusive strategy used by the school. Moreover, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) emerged as the logical approach resulting from the conceptualisation of inclusive education as a broad project, because far from focusing on the participation of the disabled, UDL embraces diversity and responds to the whole range of individual differences (Mino, 2004). Avramidis & Wilde (2010) stress the need for a significant paradigm shift to change the current focus from deficit to diversity. This

perception of inclusive education as an approach that simply responds to diversity rather than only concerning specific groups of children, is also more aligned with the SDGs, where there is a clear focus on access to quality education for all (UN, 2015).

The Ricci & Fingon article presents a model for pre-service teacher training for inclusive education, and more specifically for fostering effective collaboration and co-teaching skills of general and special educators in the USA. The authors report on a strategy for modeling co-teaching techniques to trainee teachers and argue that pre-service training programmes need to specifically work on the development of teachers' collaboration and co-teaching skills. Reflecting on their experiences of modeling co-teaching to their students, the authors give a fascinating account of a progressive shift in their thinking: *'We reflected upon and described our own professional growth as professors, particularly as we reviewed transcripts of our email exchanges in which there was a noticeable shift in how we ourselves moved from viewing "my students" and "my course" and "your students" and "your course" to a different point of view of "our students" and "our courses" to talk about our work.'* The finding that the two professors' perceptions were subject to change is encouraging if considered in relation to the tendency of many mainstream teachers to perceive inclusive education as linked to specific children; hence as the responsibility of support staff (i.e. special educators, teaching assistants or learning support assistants, depending on the context), which I have also seen in my own research. This article therefore shows that experiencing co-teaching enables teachers to start perceiving all children in their class as their shared responsibility, and teaches them that embracing diversity is everyone's job, thus *'creating a classroom culture of acceptance, in which learning variations and strategies to address those variations are the norm'*(Ricci & Fingon).

Finally, the article written by Buli-Holmberg & Kamenopoulou is again focused on teacher preparation for inclusive education, but within a wider context. The authors critically discuss key values of inclusive education as stipulated over 30 years ago in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and demonstrate how these underpinned the curriculum of a post-graduate programme on special and inclusive education for teachers from global South and North countries. They moreover report on a research that focused on 10 of these students mid-way through the programme and captured their understandings, their awareness of changes in their understanding, and their criteria for practicing inclusive education (in other words, what they thought is required for inclusive education to be successful in practice). This article raises timely and thus far unanswered theoretical and practical questions about the meaning of inclusive education, its remit and focus, and its relation to special education (Kiuppis, 2014; Kamenopoulou, Buli-Holmberg & Siska, 2015).

In a nutshell, this special issue will doubtless be a useful resource for everyone working in the field of inclusive education from the point of view of policy, practice, theory or research. However, given that access for all learners to inclusive and equitable quality education is now at the heart of the global education agenda encapsulated in the SDGs, this special issue will be of use as

well to a wider audience from the education field more generally.

After all, shouldn't all 'quality education' be inclusive?

References

Hardy, I. & Woodcock, S. (2015). Inclusive Education policies: discourses of difference, diversity and deficit. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 19*(2), 141-164.

Kamenopoulou, L., Buli-Holmberg, J., &Siska, J. (2015). An exploration of student teachers' perspectives at the start of a post-graduate study programme on Inclusion and Special Needs Education.*International Journal of Inclusive Education, 20*(7), 743-755.

Kamenopoulou, L. &Dukpa, D. (2017). Karma and human rights: Bhutanese teachers' perspectives on inclusion and disability. *International Journal of Inclusive Education.* DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2017.1365274.

Kiuppis, F. (2014). Why (not) associate the principle of inclusion with disability? Tracing connections from the start of the 'Salamanca Process'. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 18*(7), 746-761.

Messiou, K. (2016). Research in the field of inclusive education: time for a rethink? *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 21*(2), 146-159.

Mino, J.J. (2004). Planning for Inclusion: Using Universal InstructionalDesign to Create a Learner-Centered Community College Classroom. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 37*, 154–160.

Mintz, J., & D. Wyse. (2015). Inclusive pedagogy and knowledge in special education: addressing the tension. *International Journal of Inclusive Education,* DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2015.1044203.

Stubbs, S. (2008). *Inclusive Education Where there are few Resources.* Oslo: Atlas Aliance.

UNESCO. (1994). *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education.*Paris. Available at: http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/SALAMA_E.PDF

United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.* New York: UN.

Watkins, A. & Meijer, Cor. J. W. (vol. eds.) (2016). Implementing Inclusive Education: Issues in Bridging the Policy-Practice Gap. In Forlin, C. (series ed.) *International Perspectives on Inclusive Education,* Vol. 8. UK, Emerald Publishing Limited.

Webster, R., Blatchford, P. & Russell, A. (2013). Challenging and changing how schools use teaching assistants: findings from the Effective Deployment of Teaching Assistants project. *School Leadership & Management: Formerly School Organisation, 33*(1), 78-96.

Wilde, A. &Avramidis, E. (2011). Mixed feelings: towards a continuum of inclusive pedagogies. Education 3-13: *International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education, 39*(1), 83-101.