

The current illusion of educational inclusion

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A growing number of countries and organizations have in the last decade declared their support for the “inclusion” of all individuals in education, responding in part to the recommendations of the autistic advocacy and neurodiversity movements, and the United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities¹. Article 24 of the UN convention supports the right of every student, including those on the autism spectrum, to access inclusive, quality, free education in their community with the necessary support to help enable them to reach their potential. Inclusion in this regard should not be confused with integration, which concentrates on the capacities of an individual to adapt to a given mainstream. Instead, inclusion demands that we change the existing educational environment in order to respond to the diverse needs of all learners.

While the goal is clearly stated, the specifics are not and the precise definition of “inclusion” has engendered fierce debate in countries around the world. Some insist that all children should be educated in the same school and preferably in the same classes. Others suggest that while shared classrooms should be prioritized, specialized provisions will remain necessary for some. Still others support what might be called partial inclusion, such as “satellite provision”, where students sometimes share facilities and at other times diverge, depending on their specific requirements at particular times.

¹ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>

This debate is very unlikely to be concluded soon. The positions are too deeply entrenched for that. Whatever specific view we take, however, we know one thing for certain: most countries are failing to include autistic children and young people effectively by any reasonable definition of the term. Current data indicate that formal recommendations and regulations guiding inclusion are well ahead of attitudes and practice throughout much of the world. Children and young people on the autism spectrum, who are already vulnerable to poor psychosocial outcomes, are at much greater risk than their non-autistic peers of being expelled from school (Green, McGinnity, Meltzer, Ford, & Goodman, 2005; see also Brede et al., 2017). Even when they are formally included, the degree and nature of that inclusion often is deeply questionable. There are reports of autistic children who are in mainstream classes being excluded from school trips or being sent home because their teaching assistant is unavailable (Atkinson, 2013). There are frequent accounts of autistic children being subject to bullying from peers and even teachers (Brede et al., 2017). There are distressing reports of children being locked in “withdrawal spaces” or physically restrained (Macdonald, 2015).

The reasons for this failure are many and complex. But the failure leads us to two conclusions.

First, making progress towards inclusion in practice is urgent and must not be delayed by a theoretical argument about the definition of inclusion. Instead, we should encourage more schools and educational policy programmes to innovate right away. Departments of Education, school districts and other similar authorities should establish their own processes, working in a collaborative spirit with the autistic and autism communities and others, to identify the immediate possibilities for improving inclusion in their own area. There are multiple areas in which such improvement could be made straight away across multiple levels of the education system. Examples include improving understanding of social and learning challenges of autistic students, at all levels from district leaders to teacher to peers,

developing individualized supports to maximize development for this group of students as they access the regular curriculum, and learning how to adapt the environmental structure of our schools and classrooms to make inclusion more successful. To take just one concrete case: there is no doubt that mainstream schools can be challenging places for autistic children and young people. They are usually physically large, noisy and chaotic, transitions between classes occur frequently throughout the school day, and the social milieu becomes ever more complex as children progress. We can include autistic children more effectively if we recognize that their intrinsic characteristics – especially their sensory differences, problems switching from one thing to the next – and make immediate changes to the local school environment. These changes can range, for example, from providing headphones to a student who is sensitive to noise to training teachers how to ensure students with autism are actively engaged in classroom activities.

Second, just as we need to encourage urgent local action on policies, systems and structures, those of us committed to the ideal of inclusion also need to work more generally, across all jurisdictions, to promote cultural change among educators, parents and peers. All too often at the moment, each of these groups can talk the language of inclusion without adhering to its value. We know that autistic students are more likely to be successfully included if school leadership is supportive (e.g., Hurrocks, White & Roberts, 2008; Praisner, 2003). We know too that the attitude and awareness of peers can be vital in facilitating acceptance (Tonnsen & Hahn, 2015; see also Williams, Gleeson, & Jones, 2017) and that education about autism can improve these attitudes (Carter & Kennedy, 2006). Surveys show, however, that the majority of parents and teachers remain skeptical towards inclusion. The Center of Neurodevelopmental Disorders at Karolinska Institutet (KIND) recently completed a large survey among school staff (primary and secondary school teachers, principals, special teachers, school health teams; N= 4,778) in 68 schools from 13 municipalities in Sweden, a

country where inclusion is enforced by law (Bartonek, Borg, Berggren, & Bölte, 2018). The survey used the INCLUSIO inventory, an organizational level inclusion assessment tool mapping a range of support needs at the individual and school levels. Among the main results were that only 6% of the participants thought that they were prepared to educate pupils with neurodevelopmental disabilities and only 14% reported they had received formal education in educating children with neurodevelopmental disabilities. In addition, merely 11% and 18% of respondents reported that they applied general (classroom) or specific (individual) supports, respectively, in order to achieve inclusion. These figures indicate a great deal of space for improvement for inclusive education in a large sample of Swedish schools. It is likely that similar work will be needed elsewhere.

Educational theorists and practitioners are unlikely to reach consensus on the ideal model of inclusion for autistic students in the near future. But whatever the debate and the challenges, it is clear that it is the job of educators to do what they can in the here-and-now to promote these children's rights, ensuring that they can access an inclusive education. It is the job of those of us committed to inclusion to continue to make the case for cultural change. Tools and strategies are available to make progress in both of these missions². Autistic children and young people are already excluded from many opportunities simply because society does not understand what it is like to be autistic. Their rights to an inclusive education should not be ignored any longer.

References

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² See, for example, <https://www.autismcrc.com.au/connect-hub/resources/teacher-resources>

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