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Adopting a More Holistic View of Inclusion

The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Educational Needs (UNESCO 1994), is widely seen as the most influential document in the promotion of inclusive education. It has become apparent that many interpretations of inclusion have been made, these being influenced by historical, cultural and socio-economic factors. With the intention of creating greater equity and ensuring education for many children who had previously been denied access to schools, the Salamanca initiative and subsequent international agreements have achieved notable successes. However, for some young people from a range of marginalised groups, engagement with the education system remains elusive. The current international socio-economic climate has resulted in many challenges to the inclusion agenda. With different support services all competing for limited resources, it is imperative that a more holistic approach whereby a greater focus upon collaboration across services and provision to inclusion is achieved.

Keywords: ?????????????

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INTRODUCTION

Thirty years after the publication of the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Educational Needs (UNESCO 1994), it may be timely to consider both the progress made towards an equitable approach to education, and to review the obstacles that continue to challenge inclusion. A useful starting point for such an analysis is the proclamation made early within the Salamanca document which reads as follows:

We believe and proclaim that

- every child has a fundamental right to education, and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning,

- every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs,
- education systems should be designed, and educational programmes implemented to take into account the wide diversity of these characteristics and needs,
- those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs,
- regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system.

It would be difficult to challenge the laudable intentions of this statement, which at the time brought hope to many and a renewed vigour from policy makers, teachers, researchers and parents who had long campaigned for the rights of all children to have access to appropriate education alongside their peers (Ainscow., Slee, and Best 2019).

PROGRESS MADE

On the 25th anniversary of the Salamanca Statement, Ainscow, Slee and Best (2019) reported evidence that the administration in many countries had made significant efforts to adopt a more inclusive approach to educational policy and practice. Furthermore, subsequent agreements and reports, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006), The Incheon Declaration (UNESCO 2015) and the UNESCO Guide for Ensuring Inclusion and Equity in Education (2017) had endorsed many of the Salamanca principles.

It was never anticipated that all countries would make progress towards inclusive schooling at the same rate. In 1994, access to education for children with disabilities and other marginalised groups varied across nations. Some of the world's economically advantaged countries had made special educational needs provision for several years, while other less prosperous nations were facing difficulties in providing for all its learners (Forlin 2013; Srivastava, de Boer, and Pijl 2013). Not least among the challenges presented, were those related to the interpretation of what inclusion means (Peters 2007; Rose, Doveston, Rajanahally

and Jament 2014; Göransson and Nilholm 2014). Haug (2016) suggests that at its most fundamental level inclusive education defines the right to of all students to receive an education. Others, (Stangvik 2013; Done and Andrews 2019) emphasise the selective nature of inclusion, whereby policy makers have established criteria that mean that participation in schools alongside their peers becomes less accessible for students with complex needs. Some (Ainscow *et.al.* 2011) have emphasised that the issue of placement limits the way in which we should define inclusion, and that we should rather be considering how we remove those obstacles that limit learning opportunities in all schools. Such differences inevitably influence the levels of expectations placed upon schools. It is therefore to be anticipated that international reviews of inclusive education would reveal considerable differences in approaches adopted and progress made (Smyth *et.al.* 2014; Halder and Argyropoulos 2019).

Over the past 30 years, the development of inclusive education has been subjected to much scrutiny through research and debate, resulting in a vast literature examining all aspects of the issue. While much of the writing generated has originated from the world's most prosperous nations, there has been a growth in research demonstrating the commitment of economically developing countries to providing more equitable approaches to education (Werning *et.al* 2016; Mendoza and Heymann 2022). Much of this published work has enabled a greater understanding of the obstacles that remain in place, and the challenges that persist in efforts to develop inclusive schools. Examples from this literature also demonstrate the importance of avoiding an imperialistic view of inclusion, whereby attempts are made to impose the approaches developed in wealthier countries upon those in less favourable circumstances. It is certainly the case that the sharing of international research and cross-cultural debates about inclusion can be beneficial, but this can only be so while understanding and respecting influential cultural and socio-economic factors (Rose 2016: Stepaniuk, 2018). While it is certain that some of the world's most disadvantaged countries have benefited from understanding the ways in which inclusion has developed elsewhere, I would suggest that there is much to be learned from the research conducted internationally.

PROGRESS STALLED

Providing access to schools for all learners demands a holistic approach to development. The notion that the provision of more school places will ensure greater inclusion is both naïve and potentially divisive. Lewin and Akyeampong (2009) suggest that access to education is central for national development and

prosperity. However, they argue that guaranteeing the quality of education provided must be a major condition for inclusive schooling to succeed. Placing a child in a classroom is no guarantee of success. Alongside school provision must come appropriate levels of resourcing and the assurance of a professional workforce that has a good understanding of the needs of all learners. The findings from research demonstrate the importance of developing positive attitudes, pedagogical skills, and understanding of individual needs in teachers, for inclusive education to succeed (Crispel, and Kasperski, 2019; Ní Bhroin, and King. 2019). Where there is an established tradition of initial teacher training and professional development for teachers, such as may be seen in Ireland, the USA or much of Western Europe, a focus upon inclusion has been maintained, and seen as important in enabling the needs of a diverse population to be addressed. Elsewhere, there remains a need to challenge deficit models of disability and stereotypical beliefs about gender caste, class and race through teacher training (Taneja-Johansson., Singal, and Samson.2021; Dignath., Rimm-Kaufman, and van Ewijk. 2022).

Much has been written about the need to challenge medico-deficit models of disability (Donoghue 2003; Haegele, and Hodge 2016), yet the notion that services should be provided to address the problems of individuals persists (Kirby 2017; Moriña, and Carnerero 2020). Segregated provision, such as has been seen in the UK is predicated on the belief that some students have deficit characteristics that are likely to inhibit their ability to be taught effectively in mainstream schools. Undoubtedly teachers who choose to teach in these specialist provisions are generally motivated and committed to their students, but this remains a deficit model that often separates them from their peers (Stephens and Fish 2010). The transition to greater educational inclusion necessitates a gradual move away from such segregated provision. This process was always going to prove challenging, and as Ainscow (2020) argues, it requires a commitment to ensure that teachers in neighbourhood mainstream schools have the confidence to support the participation and learning of an increasingly diverse range of learners.

Much has already been done to assist schools in their efforts to address the needs of a more diverse population. Increased opportunities for professional development (Tristani, and Bassett-Gunter 2019; Holmqvist, and Lelinge 2020), promoting effective models of leadership for inclusion (DeMatthews *et.al*. 2020; Lambrecht *et.al*. 2020) and specific pedagogical approaches such as peer tutoring (Toulia, Strogilos and Avramidis 2023) or collaborative learning (Albalat, Lago Martínez and García 2022), have made contributions to the development of inclusive classrooms. Despite the progress made, the route towards inclusive schooling has not been an easy one, and major obstacles still remain to be addressed.

TAKING A MORE HOLISTIC VIEW

Teachers and other professionals working in schools have undoubtedly taken the lead in promoting inclusion, but I would suggest that progress has largely stalled because of the narrow view that has been taken when addressing issues of diversity. Perhaps it would be timely to examine those factors that continue to present obstacles in our efforts to achieve greater equity in schooling. In so doing we may begin by considering the economic constraints under which schools are currently working. Many countries in recent years have undergone periods of economic challenge and austerity that can in part be related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Government financial resources have experienced pressure and have been focused upon maintenance rather than development of provision. Where this has happened, we have seen a restriction of resources that has inevitably placed pressure upon schools and their ability to address a broadening of needs. In some instances, financial constraints have impacted the ability of schools to support the professional development of staff, with the consequent limiting of those new pedagogical skills that may be needed to teach a more diverse population.

In many countries there is disparity between the provision made in private and government schools (Opoku *et.al.* 2020). In India for example, the resourcing of private schools, generally attended by children from wealthier families is significantly better than that in government schools (Kingdon 2020). Similarly, families living in urban areas are more likely to have access to quality educational, health and social facilities than those in remote or rural areas (Feruza., Madina, and Dilbar 2020; Rose *et.al* 2021).

Perhaps the greatest challenge to inclusion is the inordinate focus on special educational needs and disability, which is only one of many inter-related factors that result in exclusion. Issues of poverty, race, gender, caste and class impact significantly upon access to schools and are the source of discrimination in many societies (Adugna *et.al*. 2020; Love and Beneke, 2021, Psaki *et.al.* 2022). While schools are of necessity focused upon the education of all children, the need to tackle the causes of discrimination and exclusion is evident, and school leaders and policy makers can ill afford to ignore these issues.

A more holistic approach to the promotion of equity and inclusion, one that considers the educational, social and health needs of students, requires that professionals across all caring services should work more closely together to confront exclusionary factors that persist in our societies. While the primary function of schools must continue to be the education of all learners, the goal of increased

inclusion will only be achieved through a concerted effort with professional colleagues, families and support groups to challenge the discrimination that limits the life chances of those who are forced to the margins of our communities. Austerity policies and a restrictive view of what constitutes successful learning have shifted the balance of debate around inclusion. If inclusion is to become a reality, we can no longer work in small factions under the headings of education, health, social services or support groups, with each competing for resources, but must combine our efforts and cement partnerships that will enable us to work together to achieve a common goal.

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