‘A school for all’ in the policy and practice nexus: Comparing ‘doing inclusion’ in different contexts. Introduction to the special issue

Inclusion of children with special needs in compulsory education is a much-debated issue in various national contexts – and thus across differing educational systems – in relation to how to achieve every child’s right to education. At a policy level, this issue is a self-evident part of discourses on education and schooling in democratic societies, manifested in documents such as the Salamanca declaration. Since the 1994 Salamanca Statement (initiated by the UNESCO), inclusive education has been high on the global agenda. Moreover, a framework for the implementation of this aim was set up in the 2015 Incheon Declaration – intended to ensure inclusive and quality education for all by 2030. Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities guarantees the right of persons with disabilities to an inclusive education system at all levels (Tossebro et al., 2020). However, the issue is even more complicated. General education in public schools is inherently complex, even apart from the ambition to make it accessible for all, and change occurs very slowly (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). As a result, it is not surprising that the development towards the ‘school for all’ is slow:

Despite the political declarations, intentions and legislations, development towards IE appears to be slow. In 2016, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities expressed deep concern about persisting challenges. The problems related to education of pupils with SEN also appear to have a pervasive impact on the pupils’ life chances, as Special needs education may serve as an exclusion mechanism. Pupils receiving SNE are six times more likely of not being in education, employment or training (the NEET-group) at the age of sixteen in UK studies, and the odds are similar across Europe. Moreover, people with disabilities (overrepresented in SNE) have an employment rate 20–40% lower than people without disabilities. Recent studies even suggest that receiving SNE in itself has adverse effects (Tossebro et al., 2020, p. 1).

In their framing of the field above, Tossebro et al. (2020) argue that schooling practices are more often complicated than is visible or operable in the political vision of a school for all. This tension between policy and practice, however, can be considered the starting point of this special issue. The editors share the impression that the strength and necessity of this vision might have contributed to an ideological and political overload in the academic discourse, which has given rise to the concern that political and partly even academic ambitions for inclusion and professional endeavours to create an inclusive pedagogical practice might be drifting apart or becoming irreconcilable.

The Danish professor of inclusive education, Susan Tetler, as referenced by Hedegaard-Sørensen and Penthin Grumloese in this special issue, considers that there has been far more focus on the reasons for inclusion than on the way in which inclusion can actually be practised (Tetler, 2015). This is also an appropriate description of the phenomenon in question, and the research that has emerged around it. We might argue that an ideological overload has contributed to this situation. It is probably hard to produce research when the solution appears to be known in advance since this might lead to a disconnect between neatly formulated policy documents and ‘messy’ practices.

Furthermore, as Ainscow et al. (2019) state in their editorial to the 25th anniversary issue of the International Journal of Inclusive Education:

As such, the promotion of inclusion is not simply a technical or organizational change – it is a movement in a clear philosophical direction. Moving to more inclusive ways of working therefore requires shifts in policy-makers’ values and ways of thinking, which enable them to provide a vision shaping a culture of inclusion, through to significant changes within schools and classrooms. And, of course, this has to involve the wider community. (p. 6)

While we concur wholeheartedly with the assessment of these scholars, we also wonder whether the clear philosophical – and we might add – moral impetus might push the endeavour towards a very abstract construction. Even if the vision is clear, theories that build only on policy documents tend to be insufficiently nuanced and might not explain the complexity of the policy and practice nexus. As a result, scholars, as well as practitioners, are inclined to follow an urge to ‘radicalize’ argumentation for their respective positions. In line with this, research

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which relies too much on examining policies might lead to methodological nationalism, meaning that the various levels of public education are placed in the background and empirical, e.g. national, cases are seen as having a natural unity with no variation and fragmentation evident among policy documents and policymakers, which would thereby overemphasize the role of the state in governing public education (Wermke & Proitz, 2019). When a theoretical perspective on complex phenomena such as ‘doing inclusion’ remains one-dimensional, theorization might be restricted to the level of critique rather than explaining practice, and why such practice is as it is.

This special issue approaches this stated rationale by focussing on policy and practice nexuses and promoting the scientific value of comparative approaches.

Policy and practice nexuses

In relation to the so-called policy and practice-nexuses (Proitz 2019), we focus on how professions ‘do inclusion’. This means that, in this special issue, we present studies on how professions approach and negotiate the subject under consideration. There are also different conceptualizations of the term ‘profession’. We would like to present the readers of this special issue with one approach that we consider helpful for reflecting on the different approaches brought together by the individual authors. We define professions here, in line with Evetts (2003), as occupations that deal with risky endeavours, that cannot be solved in a technical way due to their complex nature:

Professions are essentially the knowledge based category of occupations which usually follow a period of tertiary education and vocational training and experience. A different way of categorizing these occupations is to see professions as the structural, occupational and institutional arrangements for dealing with work associated with the uncertainties of modern lives in risk societies. Professionals are extensively engaged in dealing with risk, with risk assessment and, through the use of expert knowledge, enabling customers and clients to deal with uncertainty. (p. 397)

Consequently, in this issue, we see various professions, such as teachers, special educators, educational administrators, politicians and others at their ‘inclusion work’, in interaction with their ‘clients’, the students of a school for all and ultimately with each other. This perspective on professions is significant here, since professionals in this understanding must relate their practices to framing policies. The emergence of professions in relation to state governance is crucial (Svensson, 2008), since their position and status is granted by the state as long as they cope with the above-mentioned risks.

A particular focus on professions enables us to examine what we call the ‘policy and practice nexus’ of ‘doing inclusion’. The term ‘nexus’ can be understood somewhat differently, and has often been used to describe the fuzzy arenas of translation between research, policy and practice, as well as in debates on evidence use in various fields and sectors (Proitz 2020).

Research has shown that meaning, norms, and values that travel between different contexts are not static and stable and that perceptions of policy may affect for example, teachers’ understandings through systems and procedures supplied by policy […]. Research has also shown how actors in schools realize and frame education policies in classrooms through their individual practices […] as co-constructors of education policy. The complex assemblage of power in policy formation and policy appropriation across multiple sites, for example, between levels of education systems and actors using a multitude of tools, complicates the study of policy and practice relationships. (Proitz, 2019, p. 1)

Understanding policy-practice nexuses of doing inclusion was the first rationale in the structuring of this special issue.

Contingency and comparison

The empirical studies in the issue at hand all share a comparative perspective, comparing professions and professional practices across various contexts, such as different countries and schools, or across different levels of practice in the same schools, or municipalities. We also present a study that compares professional beliefs over time.

This comparative approach enables us to illuminate the relation between a particular context, which can change over time, space or in regard to levels within the same system, and a certain professional practice and belief. As with all practices in the social world, we assume the practice of inclusion is highly contingent, meaning that there are differing perspectives on the phenomenon and its implementation which cannot be easily categorized as right or wrong. Contingency is a well-trodden concept in the humanities and social sciences, and here we are only able to present part of the existing scholarly work in order to define the term theoretically.

A common-sense definition is that something could have happened differently or be otherwise (Luhmann, 2002). Contingency means not simply infinite possibilities, but a specified infinity in which something is neither necessary nor impossible, but is a real alternative (Makropoulos, 2004). Contingency is essentially about understanding available alternatives, facilitating understanding of the complex possibility.
structures, and the fluid construction of this reasoning (Kauko & Wermke, 2018). Contingency thus becomes visible through an awareness of other possibilities that are genuine alternatives. In line with such an understanding, action is not the realization of a possibility that excludes all other possibilities by excluding selection and the constitution of definition, but the realization of a possibility in relation to other possibilities that exist, but have not been chosen (ibid.)

Simply put, such a ‘contingency’ perspective, put forward by a comparative approach, might help us to detach the issue of inclusion or doing inclusion from the above mentioned ideological and normative overload. The ambition or philosophical direction towards fairness and equity for all children is not open to any doubt. The why of inclusion is quite clear. However, the path there, in terms of how to do inclusion (see above) might differ, depending on whom you ask and where. The knowledge about nation, municipality, school- or profession-specific ambitions and beliefs can increase the understanding of all the dilemmas of inclusion. A contingency perspective might also ease the pressure on the professionals working towards inclusion. Doing inclusions, as with doing education in general, requires a certain amount of discretion to adjust to the particular contexts and their nature (Wermke & Paulsrud, 2019).

**The contributions of this special issue**

This issue starts with an essay by Mel Ainscow, who presents the complexity of inclusion due to multiplicity of stakeholders and rationales that must exist to make a school for all possible. To communicate and understand this complexity, he suggests a model that he calls the ‘ecology of equity’. This model and the notion of ecologies can be used in comparative approaches to display context-specific configurations of a possible school for all. He calls this a whole system approach (Figure 1, Ainscow, in this special issue).

In order to emphasize the contingency in how we can understand and develop further our field of study, we have asked two experienced scholars to comment on Ainscow’s essay: Professor of Education, Peder Haug, from Norway, and the German Professor of Inclusive Education and Organization, Michel Knigge. Both acknowledge the relevance of Ainscow’s thought and his model, but both pinpoint various aspects that can be elaborated upon further. In other words, they remind us that thinking inclusion in terms of an ecology of equity is fertile, but such a holistic view needs to be qualified at different points, in order to achieve more analytical precision for doing and understanding inclusion.

Knigge critically reflects on Ainscow’s understanding of evidence, and discusses the issue of evidence-based practice with regard to its growing importance in educational practice and research over the last decade. He argues that existing practices of inclusion must be based on evidence, and this evidence can be delivered by research. However, we also need further and deeper discussion on what evidence actually is, and those in special and inclusive education research should accept the task. Haug views a lack of an appropriate emphasis on ‘the political’ in Ainscow’s understanding. Inclusion in a school system must start with the political will to do so: ‘Most important in implementing inclusive education in schools is, in my view, that it has to be a national priority. To achieve these ambitious aims, national policy should both legitimate and support schools’ struggles towards inclusive actions’ (p. 4). Moreover, as we argue, with this highlighting of the political, which in education remains a national matter, Haug reminds us, the path to a school for all is not only based on research and best

![Figure 1. Ecology of equity.](image-url)
practice, but also on having the right moral perspective. It is also in all parts of the ecosystem a thorny path of political negotiation.

In making this selection of essay and comments, we also update the classic work of David Skidmore from 1996, which shows that special education as a discipline builds on different paradigms that have emerged both in parallel and alongside other critical approaches. He argues that three paradigms can be distinguished, namely the psycho-medical, the sociological and the organizational paradigms, which contrast along the following dimensions: conceptualization of special needs, comprising a model of causation and corresponding proposal for intervention; level of focus; and underlying epistemology (p. 1). It is obvious that the three scholars presented could be seen as representative of different paradigms, but they are nevertheless still researchers in the field of inclusive and special education. We want to pinpoint how important the intersection of paradigms is, to use the strength of an academic discipline that contains multiple epistemologies and methodologies. Skidmore (1996) presents an idea of an integrated theoretical framework for research on special educational needs which attributes the different paradigms particular to different levels of education: the psycho-medical (micro level of learning), the sociological (macro level of society) and the organizational (meso level of institution). Consequently, we can use different epistemological approaches, in order to examine a desired school for all. In considering Skidmore’s framework, we may recommend discussing further how various concepts and methodologies can be (vertically and horizontally) interconnected to understand the dimensions of the complex world of ‘doing inclusion’.

These three pieces are invited papers and have therefore not undergone a rigorous peer-review process. The papers have been read by the editors of the special issue at hand, and if necessary revised in open dialogue with the authors. With this essay and comments approach, we also put forward our desire that such academic debates could in the future find more favour among international journals. This more general section (including this introduction) aims to frame the subject conceptually. It is followed by six empirical papers addressing the question of how to achieve the aim of inclusion.

Lotte Hedegaard-Soerensen and Sine Penthin Grumloese present an article with a twofold concern. Firstly, they bring to our attention a very significant comparative project that focuses on those who are hard to reach. The EU financed project ‘Reaching the Hard to Reach ‘ReHaRe’ demonstrates possibilities to think and change schooling in a way that takes students’ perspectives seriously. It also presents to us how the students’ perspective, in particular those of the hard to reach students, can be examined. The second part of the paper illustrates the complexity which emerges when such approaches (as the ReHaRe) are put into practice in different national and local contexts. By focussing on the Danish context, the authors show how the implementation of the method was heavily dependent on the school culture of the various schools included in the project. Depending on how schools in a rather decentralized school system such as the Danish implement recent accountability policies coming from a national level, school cultures might differ, especially in terms of benchmarking and monitoring. The more schools implement such kinds of governance into their school, the less they are open to a genuine student perspective and to change in general, meaning that the form followed the method, without changing possible educational practices. Due to accountability cultures, risk-taking in favour of the student is less expected. From our policy and practice perspective, it is interesting that, at least in the case of Denmark, there is considerable discretion at the school level to enact national policies. Although the more recent governance tools appear to be rigid and standardizing at the policy level, we nevertheless see significant variance in how schools adapt to these policies. This is an important finding regarding how a school for all can be achieved.

Thomas Barrow and Daniel Östlund address the issue of assessment procedures in the context of Special Educational Needs (SEN), from both a policy and a practice perspective. They compare assessment regulations and corresponding documents from Swedish and German (North Rhein-Westphalia, NRW) contexts with regard to (1) central elements of SEN assessment, (2) participation of pupils and parents in the assessment process, (3) the consequences of SEN assessment procedures for students, (4) the thought styles regarding SEN which can be drawn from these comparisons. The authors provide a historical overview of the development of SEN and related practices in both educational systems, before presenting results from their comparative educational analysis, which is based on 29 SEN assessment reports from each country (total N = 58). While identifying different objectives associated with SEN assessment reports between the two countries, interestingly, the authors also identify meaningful similarities. For example, the participation of parents and pupils rarely took place in the analysed documents, while classroom observations play a central role. Overall, the data show a prevailing categorical perspective – thinking about students having problems – instead of generally focusing on the relation between student and learning environment. Thus, this paper also contributes to our understanding of how inclusive practices could be modelled (e.g. through a relational perspective), and how in practice certain assessment procedures promote a more static model.
that can be related to a historically grounded medical perspective on diagnostic procedures.

Janne Hedegaard Hansen, Suzanne Carrington, Charlotte Riis Jensen, Mette Molbaek, and Maria Christina Secher Schmidt outline a comparison between different professions’ perspectives on inclusion. The corresponding roles and functions of these professions result in different aims for inclusion, which are distinguished by what is seen as hindering inclusion. Interestingly, these differing understandings still appear to amount to locating problems in the area of compensation strategies for individual students. This contributes to a continuation of how inclusion is challenged. They offer support, by way of example through a Danish research project, for a framework to address necessary steps towards inclusion. The process of transformation from ‘general plus special education’ towards an inclusive education model, the authors argue, builds on the success of cross-professional collaboration. By focusing on these relations between professionals and what is required for the actors to be able to implement collaboration, a clearer picture of sub-practices in these relations emerges. A specific example of the goal of collaboration is how teachers require support to change what they do in the classroom, especially with respect to content, methods and approaches. This sub-practice is reliant on the success of numerous necessary sub-practices involving different professions which must operate in concert to bring about a transformation towards inclusion.

Ingrid Olsson and Lise Roll-Pettersson provide a very practice-oriented, evidence-based perspective on the challenges for creating inclusive pedagogical settings for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Swedish preschools. They make use of the Didactic Triangle as a theoretical and analytical tool in this qualitative case study. This can be considered an innovative approach with regard to relating theory and practice— a major challenge in the field of inclusive education as discussed above. The authors elaborate on the three cornerstones of the triangle— Child, Pedagogue, and Subject— and based on their qualitative data provide concrete examples of the specific contributions regarding these different cornerstones as the basis for collaborative efforts of different stakeholders. Based on the notion of the Didactic Triangle, the authors refer to two elements of inclusive practices in Swedish preschools, namely ‘habilitation centers’ (HC) and ‘Intensive Behavioral Interventions’ (IBI). While discussing the role of HCs as a potential resource for multi-professional collaboration in general, focusing on IBI practices allows the researchers to show how this specific approach can provide a common foundation for this collaboration. In sum, this paper can be considered a starting point for future empirical research trying to deepen our understanding of the collaborative nature of inclusive educational practices.

Christian Ydesen and Camila Kold Andersen describe and draw conclusions about what hinders the implementation of municipal education policies. The analyses of discourse on the three different levels of a local authority responsible for education provision show how inclusion is not accurately described as a local phenomenon, but a rather complex objective for authorities invested with the power to reform education systems. By applying a framework in a comparative education approach focusing on interplay between transfer (ideas about inclusion) and the context afforded in a Danish local municipality. This way of looking at education, as a part of a globalization process, requires the multilevel discourse analysis and then a description of the enactment of policy. In other words, the idea of inclusion goes through politics, into authoritarian power, and onto school practice. The authors clarify that the difficulties of implementation of organizational change by locating discrepancies in discourse in how they discuss understandings of what should be carried out. Together with exemplifying how a point of orientation, 97% of pupils as included, once written into policy can persist even when the formulation is abandoned, the interrelation between actors and the products they produce exemplifies their efforts and the new challenges resulting from them.

Kajsa Falkner and Johanna Dahlberg-Larsson present a study in which they compare Swedish future special education teachers’ (SET) perspectives on their trajectories of learning to become special education teachers, both at the beginning and end of their training. The Swedish case of special educator/education teachers is especially interesting. Regarding the training of this group, two interesting phenomena are apparent, and these complicate an understanding of the development of this group even further. (1) Due to the expectations of the state to increase special educational support in schools in relation to instruction, the vast majority of special teachers already work with children at risk at their individual schools. In short, it could be stated that they already work as special education teachers, although they lack training or certification as such. Regarding UKÄ (2015), 50% of all working SETs are not graduates. (2) In order to be allowed to participate in the graduate programme, students need to have a prior education in school/preschool-related educational professions. Most of them have a subject teacher education at undergraduate level, with at least 3 years’ work experience as teachers. Consequently, special teacher students often have a developed teacher identity when they start their education. Following on from Falkner and Dahlberg-Larsson, becoming a member
in a special education teacher setting can be seen as a trajectory of learning through a professional landscape of knowledge. Recently, Wenger, together with his wife and colleagues (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015) have introduced the concept of knowledgeability, in order to describe participation in or knowledge about different communities of practice. Knowledgeability manifests in a person’s relations to a multiplicity of practices and communities of practice across the landscape. In these relations, identification may involve little or no accountability to actual competence in particular communities. Nevertheless, these practices may be just as significant in constituting an identity of knowledgeability. Knowledgeability also comprises issues concerning what knowledge is worth to particular groups. Moreover, identification is understood as something that is modulated across the whole landscape.

Overall, we hope that this collection of research on doing inclusion can contribute to a further understanding and provide an impetus for further collaboration.

Notes

1. http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/education-2030-incheon-framework-for-action-implementation-of-sdg4-2016-en_2.pdf.

2. United Nations (2006) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, New York, Author.

3. General Comment no. 4, 2016, CRPD/C/GC/4, cf. also the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 9, 2006.

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