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Approaches to Inclusive Education in Slovenia from a Comparative Angle

Abstract

Many countries change their education systems in order to make them more inclusive. Yet, the way inclusion is understood and implemented, varies greatly. This paper describes key elements of inclusive policy in Slovenia. The policy is evaluated against Haug's three stages of the development of the concept of inclusion and Opertti, Walker and Zhang's four core approaches that prevail in the international arena. Research method adopted is document analysis. The analysis builds on Olivera's concept of the second-degree use of the comparative data. The findings indicate that Slovenian policy primarily reflects a human rights-based understanding of inclusion, focused on students with special needs. The author aims to provide a foundation for further comparative research on inclusion.

Keywords: inclusive education, inclusive policy in Slovenia, integration, students with special needs, marginalised groups

Introduction

Opertti, Walker and Zhang (2014) stated: "Countries at large are becoming increasingly aware of the need to revamp the educational system as they attempt to make inclusion truly effective" (p. 151). However, the way it is implemented and how inclusion is understood vary largely (Arduin, 2015; Florian, 2014; Mitchell, 2015). Haug (2017) identified three stages of the concept's development, while Opertti, Walker and Zhang (2014) described four core approaches that prevail in the international arena and reflect the development of inclusive education. Both these classifications will serve as methodological tools for analysing and evaluating the Slovenian approach to inclusion in education. This paper is divided into three sections. The first section provides a brief discussion on both classifications, the second section explains the methodology framework, and the third one presents and discusses the main findings.

Theoretical background

Haug (2017) identified three stages of the development of the concept of inclusion: (1) integration, (2) a narrow understanding of inclusion, and (3) a broad understanding of inclusion. Integration started in the 1960s, when some countries began to include students with special needs (SEN students) in mainstream schools. This phase was primarily connected to the placement of SEN students in mainstream schools and the organisation of education (Lesar, 2009; Florian, 2014). A narrow understanding of integration appeared in the USA in the 1970s. This type of understanding devotes specific attention to the pedagogical process. Based on this understanding, SEN students should be educated alongside their peers from their

local area, while simultaneously having access to differentiated and individualised support, adapted programmes and adapted assessment in accordance with their abilities and interests. Finally, a broad understanding of inclusion is based on fundamentally different premises than the previous ones in that it proceeds from the belief that a school has to accept diversity as the positive starting point for its activity. In a broad understanding, inclusion is no longer tied merely to SEN students. Rather, it applies simultaneously to all students facing disabilities in learning and participation (Lesar, 2009) and to students in general, since it is the responsibility of the school to establish learning conditions for all children and to teach them to live with diversity.

Establishing broad understanding is a major challenge that requires the coherent functioning of the entire system (from legislation, programmes and learning materials to school organisation and the level of instruction and relationships). It also requires a change in existing mentality and pedagogical practices; the idea of high-quality teaching is in the foreground of a broad understanding of inclusion. The teacher must, above all, accept diversity as a positive value and be sensitive and responsive to differences between children (Ermenc, Jeznik & Mažgon, 2019). As pointed out by Lesar and Žveglič Mihelič (2018):

The ongoing re-examination of all pedagogical processes in light of inclusion/exclusion of every child and his/her subsequent learning, social and personal development is crucial [...]. Adaptations to teaching and/or upbringing are therefore not subject to a fixed formal status (e.g., student with SEN), which the child acquires outside his/her school; instead (pre)school teachers first try to solve—by themselves and in collaboration with the child and his/her parents—the difficulty or the problem that has appeared. (p. 3)

Operti, Walker and Zhang (2014) identified the following four core approaches that have prevailed in the international education arena:

1. **Human rights-based perspective.** This perspective has its roots in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The rights-based approach (i.e., all humans have the right to education; all children have the right to receive an education that does not discriminate on the basis of disability, ethnicity, religion, language, gender, capabilities or any other reason) built the foundation for the development of inclusive education and pedagogy.
2. **Response to children with special needs.** Since the adoption of the World Declaration on Education for All in 1990, an overall vision of universal access to education for all children, youth and adults, as well as equity among all, has been promoted. The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) was particularly important to this perspective because of “the focus it brought to mainstreaming students with special needs into regular schools, along with the prioritization of targeted excluded groups linked to ethnic, gender, cultural, socio-economic, and migrant factors” (Operti, Walker & Zhang, 2014, pp. 152-153). This approach views inclusion from the deficitarian perspective (e.g., from the perspective of students’ problems/handicaps).
3. **Response to marginalised groups.** After 2000, particularly with the adoption of the Dakar Framework for Action, more emphasis was placed on expanding the notion of inclusive education; more groups began to be considered marginalised, while the issue of quality education for all

simultaneously moved to the foreground of the discussion. Governments have been encouraged to allocate more resources to certain excluded groups.

4. **Transforming the education system.** Ten years after the adoption of the Dakar Framework, the UNESCO EFA Monitoring Report emphasized the role of inclusive education as a condition for developing more inclusive societies. The report supported the idea of linking equity and quality policies and explained inclusion as a “continually evolving process (a journey) to respect, understand, address and respond to learners’ diversities, entailing changes in the educational system at large” (p. 157). Such a perspective can be called transformative, provided that it is implemented alongside a global vision of education and a holistic perspective of the education system.

Research approach

Research aim and questions

This paper attempts to describe key elements of inclusive policy in Slovenia as well as to evaluate this policy against Haug’s (2017) three stages of development and Operti, Walker and Zhang’s (2014) comparative framework. For these purposes, the following research questions were selected:

1. Does an official or prevailing definition of inclusion exist in Slovenia? Are any specific target groups defined?
2. Does the country provide separate programmes for typical and SEN students, or one integrative programme/curriculum?
3. How is the placement of SEN students in mainstream or special schools regulated?
4. How is teacher education organised? Does it separate mainstream teachers from special teachers? What is the prevailing understanding of inclusion among faculty?
5. How are schools prepared to work in inclusive environments?

Research method and sources

Document analysis was adopted as the research method. The data were gathered through primary or secondary sources. Primary sources comprise first-hand data (Olivera, 1988), that is, legal documents and national data as well as already existing data (e.g., research findings conducted by Slovenian researchers). The analysis built on Olivera’s (1988) concept of the second-degree use of the comparative data:

What is compared are not the groups (systems) as such, trait by trait or in their total and unique reality but the corresponding abstract models or relational patterns, which make comparison possible by transcending the uniqueness of individual systems. (p. 180)

This paper aims to provide a foundation for further comparative research on inclusion, which would bring about deeper understanding beyond the differences arising from particular societal conditions.

The research context

After Slovenia gained independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, it undertook a reform of its entire education system, guided by principles based on human rights

and the rule of law. The reformers' aim was to develop a system in which people could achieve high education standards comparable to European ones (White Paper, 1996). Then, the education system focused on SEN children as well; the system supported the integration of SEN children into mainstream schools, and targeted provision or resources were put in place to benefit this group of students (e.g., disabled person's assistants, additional specialised assistance, aids, architectural adaptations, etc.). The last major changes were introduced in 2000, with the adoption of the Placement of Children with Special Needs Act (hereinafter: The Act), which has since undergone several amendments (Placement of Children, 2012).

Following international recommendations, Slovenia has introduced an integration model of education for pupils with SEN:

Slovenia did reform the former two-track into a multi-track school system ..., but it retained the categorisation of children and the medical and professional discourse both in legislation and in professional documents. (Lesar & Žvegljč Mihelič, 2018, pp. 2-3)

As is typical of liberal policies, the Slovenian policy advocated the need to establish a system that would allow all participants, regardless of circumstances, to achieve optimum learning outcomes (White Paper, 1996). Despite this, little attention was paid to other marginalised groups besides SEN children, such as Roma, immigrants and children facing poverty (Lesar, 2017). After 2004, when Slovenia joined the EU, the educational authorities began to pay additional attention to students from immigrant backgrounds, and the Strategy for the Integration of Children from Migrant Backgrounds into the Education System was adopted in 2007 (Strategija vključevanja, 2007). However, the measures the strategy introduced have not been incorporated into a more universal, inclusive approach.

The findings

Definition and targeted groups

No universal inclusion policy exists in Slovenia that unifies policy measures targeted at all at-risk or identity groups (Lesar, 2017). In official documents, the term 'inclusion' is not used; instead, the term 'integration' is adopted. However, this term is used only in relation to SEN students. The Act defines the following groups as SEN students: children with learning difficulties, blind and visually impaired children, deaf and hearing impaired children, children with speech and language disorders, physically handicapped children, chronically ill children, children with deficits in specific areas of learning, children with autistic disorders and children with emotional and behavioural disorders who require the adapted provision of education programmes with additional specialised assistance or adapted education programmes/special education programmes (Article 2).

The programmes

The Act distinguishes between several types of education programmes (multi-track system):

- Education programmes with adapted provision and additional specialised assistance aimed at SEN students for whom adaptations in the provision of

the programme, which is otherwise identical to the mainstream primary curriculum, are sufficient.

- Adapted education programmes with equivalent performance criteria. These programmes include adaptations to the actual programmes for various groups of SEN students (e.g., deaf children). For example, lesson organisation, assessment methods, etc., are adapted. Additional specialised assistance is also provided.
- Adapted education programmes with lower performance criteria particularly aimed at students with mild learning difficulties.
- Special education programmes for students with moderate and severe learning difficulties.
- Education programmes aimed at students with behavioural and personality disorders.

The first two types of programmes are provided in mainstream schools, while the others are, as a rule, provided in specialised schools. An individual school can offer multiple programmes simultaneously, but in the case of lower performance criteria, these programmes are always provided in separate classes. The school prepares an individualised curriculum for every pupil enrolled in one of the above programmes that contains all the adaptations the student requires to participate equally in lessons and to achieve optimal learning objectives.

The Act also allows the enrolment of children with mild intellectual disabilities in mainstream schools and thus provides for the integration of standard and adapted programmes. However, this practice has not taken off because the basic conditions for the coordination of two or more programmes within a single class have not been met (Ermenc, Jeznik & Mažgon, 2019; Selih, 2013).

The placement of SEN students

The Act provides that the decision on the manner of inclusion of pupils with SEN in the education system is made by the appropriate expert panel. During the placement process, this panel defines the special needs of the pupils in question and places them in one of several education programmes for SEN pupils in accordance with their needs. Lesar and Žveglič Mihelič (2018) argued that the placement and integration of SEN students in Slovenian education is still marked by the special educationists' viewpoint, a psycho-medical paradigm, professional discourse and assimilation of the child into a rigid, everyday school-life.

Teacher education and faculty attitudes

Future teachers follow a two-track system of study that separates the study of special and rehabilitation pedagogy from general pedagogical programmes (Ermenc, Jeznik & Mažgon, 2019). The education of SEN pupils receives more attention in pedagogical programmes than does the education of other vulnerable groups of learners (Messner, Worek & Peček, 2016). However, both types of teacher education programmes are still largely characterised by the medical deficit approach to special educational needs and discourses of inability/incapability. One group of experts has proved that SEN students do not perform as well in mainstream schools (Rovšek, 2013; Slavec Gornik, 2016), while another group has proved the opposite (Seničar & Kobal Grum, 2012; Lesar & Smrtnik Vitulič, 2014). Among some

university teachers, there is a movement towards a pedagogical discourse that views everyone as being capable of learning and participating (Lesar, 2009; Rutar, 2016).

School involvement

A five-stage model of learning support has lately challenged the “mainstream–special” divide. Instead, schools are encouraged to grade the level of support according to the individual student’s needs: (1) support provided by teachers (remedial and supplementary lessons), (2) support provided by school counsellors, (3) individual or group additional learning support, (4) support provided by external experts, and (5) inclusion of a student in the education programme with adapted provision and additional specialised assistance. However, since schools must find their own resources, the model has not been fully implemented (Lesar & Žveglič Mihelič, 2018).

Conclusion

Slovenian policy primarily reflects a human rights-based understanding (Operti, Walker & Zhang’s first approach), and a narrow understanding of inclusion (Haug) focused on students with special needs (Operti, Walker & Zhang’s second approach). Students with official SEN status are subject to specific rights, yet these rights are based on the diagnosis of their deficits. More groups have begun to be considered marginalised, particularly students from migrant backgrounds (Operti, Walker & Zhang’s third approach), yet the categorisation of children and the medical and professional discourse, psycho-medical paradigm and assimilation of a child into a rigid everyday school-life still prevail.

Thus, Slovenia combines both approaches, the first and second and is gradually moving towards the third one. The transformative approach is currently recognised by some researchers who claim that inclusion should ultimately be a synthesis of human rights and transformative approaches. The classical liberal discourse gives priority to protecting individual rights, including special rights for everyone in a disadvantaged position (Rawls, 1971). However, it simultaneously overlooks the importance of establishing an inclusive society based on solidarity (Kymlicka, 2005). Implementing measures for specific disadvantaged groups assumes the deficitary nature of these individuals or groups who, therefore, enjoy special assistance (Thomas, 2013). In contrast, a broad or transformative understanding of inclusion places in the foreground the values of the common good, equality, coexistence and cooperation, and it is inseparably connected to a different view of the child or the student. In this understanding, the student is no longer understood through the prism of a deviation from the ‘normal’, but as a person capable of learning (Reindal, 2016) who brings a new quality to the life of the community.

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