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Prof. Michael Noah Weiss
(University of South-Eastern Norway)

and

Prof. Guro Hansen Helskog
(University of South-Eastern Norway)

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Reflective Practice Research in International Collaboration

Developing Teacher Education in Togetherness

Edited by

Guro Hansen Helskog
Ingrid R. Christensen
Åsmund Aamaas

LIT

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Chapter 11: Shifting understandings of Inclusive education

Audrey Paradis[1], Jarno Slendebroek[2], Leandra Ve Saskia Romey[3], Marianne Reuse[4], Md Abu Nayeem[5], Laurel Seppälä[6], Albina Marchenko[7] and Elizabeth Harlow[8]

Abstract

Inclusive education (IE) has become important for education systems around the world, but what IE entails seems to differ depending on local definitions. This article explores the changing perceptions of IE in Pune, India, as experienced through the lenses of learners from a Finnish university. This is accomplished by analysing narratives that emerged from the mobility programme with the theoretical context, focusing on the experiences that were most impactful on the mobility's participants. Reflective analysis of the narratives shows that theoretical preparation and practical experience are both necessary to conduct genuine intercultural collaboration. Additionally, our analysis suggests that national policies concerning IE can have varied effects on local educational institutions, often relying on the skills and motivation of local actors when it comes to the implementation in their contextual realities. Lastly, we observe that the adaptability of IE is important to fit the needs of specific local environmental needs.

Key words:

inclusive education, contextual understandings, higher education mobility, intercultural collaboration, policy implementation

Introduction and background

We approach this article as a collective. We are the students and main lecturer of the international master's degree programme in Education and Globalisation (Edglo), within the Faculty of Education at the University of Oulu in Finland. Some of the themes we focus on during our studies in-

clude social justice, decoloniality, intercultural competencies and diversity. In 2021, our faculty joined a coalition of projects and partners led by the University of South-Eastern Norway (funded by HK-Dir Norway) and Savitribai Phule Pune University. Our side of the project was in part financed by the Team Finland Knowledge Programme and the Finnish Agency for Education, and as a result, a course called *Teacher Education for Sustainable Futures* (TESF) was designed for educators from Finland, Norway, and India. As a part of the international mobility included in the second iteration of this course, one advisor, six Edglo students, six students from different education programmes of the Faculty of Education in Oulu, and two interns were recruited to be a part of the course and of the mobility on the Finnish part. The mobility included the Finnish and Norwegian delegations spending about a week in Pune, India, in February 2023, and the Indian delegation visiting Oulu, Finland, for about a week in April 2023. Activities in both contexts included on-campus lectures and activities, and different school and NGO visits.

To position ourselves as the Edglo writing collective, most of us are initially trained as teachers and have evolved as such in our home countries (Bangladesh, Canada, Chile, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Russia, and the United States). Together, we are committed to critically approaching and advancing issues related to global education and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education). With this in mind, we started the academic year together, knowing that we were engaging with this TESF course and mobility, and immediately engaged in research planning. We decided that we would use this course opportunity to conduct our own research, and accordingly, from September 2022 up until the end of the course, we engaged in discussions, (expert) meetings, workshops, readings, and diary writings about what we would like to research in this project. As a part of it, we decided to focus on inclusive education as a theme within the TESF course and designed three workshops to be led by Edglo students with all the course participants – one workshop in India and two workshops in Finland.

This article is based on this history and related data collection, and on our own recollections of what happened during the mobility and during the workshops focusing on participants of Finnish and Indian universities. In intercultural workshops, participants from Finland and India discussed different aspects of IE in their respective contexts with each other. The workshops had participants from the Finnish and Indian delegations split into mixed groups and discuss two passages of articles about inclusive education

(IE) – one passage focusing on the Indian context and one on the Finnish context. This article will thereby first contrast different narratives, written by different members of our collective, focusing on the most striking and vivid memories within the project. Next, we will analyse our narratives to establish main themes. We will then problematise how our narratives and related themes are theoretically supported to offer reflections and suggestions concerning international collaboration efforts.

Narratives

To make the most sense of the three narratives below, some considerations are noteworthy. First, in our Edglo team and long before our short exchange to India, we were all in agreement that *considering context* is fundamental in discussing different concepts and their meaning. This agreement was already present when we all met in our master's degree courses and discussed education in our respective home contexts. Some participants felt that practical considerations were more emphasised than information regarding cultural norms and differences, as intercultural competence is necessary to understand the context of experiences in a culture different from your own. Secondly, in preparation for the trip, we read articles and researched IE with the aim of familiarising ourselves with different definitions of the concept and how it is understood in contexts such as Finland and India. We focused mainly on definitions and how IE was understood and took place in both contexts. However, we did not discuss as much the actors involved in IE, which is an issue that became more apparent and significant throughout the course of our experience.

Narrative 1 – The changing meaning of inclusive education

While engaging with IE literature before our trip, and despite our prior common understanding of the varying *contextual* meanings of different concepts, some of us were surprised to read that IE also has different contextual meanings. The more surprised among us generally shared an understanding of IE that was essentially based on hegemony and agencies, which results from our different intercultural competencies and experiences. Imagining IE to mean simply that all learners have to be included in education together for the best of all, our collective also pictured the need for inclusion of students with various learning, physical, cognitive, socio-emotional, or linguistic needs. With this understanding, it was slightly surprising to engage

with literature from the Indian context that emphasized including "caste or street children, but mostly only mentions children with physical/mental disabilities" (Singal, 2005, p. 335). The initial surprise shifted to a broader understanding of what IE can mean at the intellectual level. This new 'abstract and broader' understanding of IE concurred, after all, with our cognitive agreement about *context considerations* being fundamental in discussing different concepts.

Our first workshop took place after we had time to walk around the city of Pune and its green and lush campus, after visiting different schools and NGOs, and after having discussions with different educators. Based on this and during discussions with our Indian peers in that workshop, we could hear them echoing what we had read earlier about IE in India, and suddenly a shift happened for some of us. It became all so clear how IE could relate to contextual necessities. When the reality of your school is to deal with a very large number of students with no money or parents, some with visible disabilities, and the related stigma, it becomes apparent that those students are prioritised because they are in high numbers and have noticeably dire needs. Being there in India, having partially witnessed what our Indian colleagues explained, their understanding of IE no longer lived in our cognitive domains only; it had trickled through our affective domains too. What we could only imagine and try to understand before became a part of our newly expanded contextual reality. To hear, see, and feel what the contextual realities actually mean allowed us to align our cognitive and affective domains in knowing about this concept, giving us access to a different understanding of the concept of IE. In all, our exchange unequivocally allowed us to step outside our shared abstract certainty, to face it and make meaning of it in practice, affording us to know differently.

Narrative 2: What is visible is hard to overlook

During our visit to India, we visited a special needs school in Pune, which brought the contextual importance of parents in IE into sharp focus for us. The school is not funded by the government, so its operational costs are higher and dependent on the tuition fees paid by parents. During our time there, we were invited on the roof terrace overlooking Pune, where chairs were lined up under big sunscreens, to attend a presentation about the school's general functioning, its staff, the situation of the children attending and also about the role of parents. It was then that the principal explained, with what can be perceived as sadness, that one of the challenges that this inclusive school faces is the reluctance from parents towards in-

clusive education and the "categorising" of their children. The principal explained that in India, some parents do not feel positively towards inclusive schools, whether they have children with special needs or not. Having their children share learning environments and experiences with children with special needs is not an attractive idea to many parents in that context. In response, the principal explained how they were trying to open the school to pupils who did not need special support so that the ones attending the institution could experience diversity, but this process was not easy. This particular school visit and conversation with the school staff kindled our group awareness about the affective factor involved in inclusive education – it is not necessarily understood as the somewhat positive thing some of us imagined. Or one can support inclusive education in general but not want to have their own children involved in it directly.

The trip to India made us realise that the understanding of inclusive education reflects the needs and experiences of the specific contexts as well. This includes and is influenced by the cultural competencies of the observers. Passing by big classrooms with more than 40 children, some of them sitting on the floor, walking through small classrooms where six children on the autism spectrum were taught, and talking with the teachers of these children, we noticed that the discourse regarding inclusion was notably more related to physical disabilities than emotional or learning disabilities. In other words, we discerned that "visible" diversity was addressed more than "invisible" ones, which is an issue that was also raised in the workshops that took place after the Indian trip, back in Finland, making even clearer for us that there are varied views on inclusivity. These ideas contrast with how we as a team discussed inclusive education in the Finnish context, where issues related to immigration and indigenous peoples have recently been the focus of the conversation around inclusivity (Sinkkonen & Kyttälä, 2014). In this sense, we vividly realized that inclusive education could consider visibility as occurring on a spectrum, from the integration of immigrants and indigenous people to aspects such as the integration of differently abled people in response to the needs and characteristics of the specific contexts.

Narrative 3 – Does inclusive education exist only for those who know what it entails?

In the workshops, we shared our general impression of inclusivity in Indian educational institutions, but we hesitated to draw conclusions based on our limited experience. Overall, we tried to be mindful and remember that Pune

is a highly urbanised area, meaning we only visited institutions in the 'concrete jungle' of Pune, finding our way through the big avenues full of buses, people, autos, animals, and mopeds. As a result, we might have gained an incomplete image of Indian schools, given that the readings we had before the mobility suggested that rural schools deal with more complicated issues. Therefore, we feel it is not productive to draw conclusions based on a restricted scope of experience, as we have to be aware of the limitations of our intercultural knowledge and competencies. In addition, we noticed that participants from India offered divergent views regarding the inclusivity of Indian schools; while some asserted that Indian schools are generally inclusive, others held a contrary opinion. We imagined that the distinction may have originated from personal positivism or scepticism, but in either case, it would be difficult to conclude without further information. With this in mind, we agreed that it is imperative to acknowledge the challenge of evaluating the inclusiveness of India's educational system, which encompasses a wide range of cultural diversity and a substantial population.

We discussed in different instances how important awareness and recognition of disabilities are for the perception of inclusion. It raises the age-old philosophical dilemma: if no one recognises it, does it still exist? The structures of education appear to be equal to us at first glance; however, this is not always the case due to normalised ableism. We can see that the system we belong to generally influences us, and so unequal practices such as a lack of inclusion become normalised and consequently challenging to identify.

Beyond systematic structures, we also discussed bureaucratic structures and external politics. We could pick up that these structures influence teachers' autonomy in India and Finland, and their ability to react to classrooms with special needs students. In our group discussions, while some argued that enhancing centralised supervision can ensure inclusivity, other students indicated that inclusivity depends on the ethical behaviour of individual teachers and that, rather than constant monitoring and control, and is necessary to cultivate teachers' commitment to inclusivity. We were moved by the passion of the Indian teachers to want the best for their students; however, we also felt how hard it can be to see each pupil when you have so many of them in your classroom and do not have the resources to cater to the needs of each child. Therefore, we have observed that differences, such as between public and private education, the number of pupils or the number of teachers in a classroom, can have an effect on how well-equipped teachers are to implement inclusion. Consequently, we feel it is important

to investigate whether, in general, Finnish and Indian teachers have the autonomy and support to implement inclusive education in their institutions.

Theoretical reflections

The recurring themes of the narratives shared are the importance of context and visibility when approaching IE. Our existing knowledge and expectations coloured how we experienced the exchange and how we saw and understood situations we faced as people from a Finnish university in India. The narratives showcase this by highlighting the visibility of different aspects of IE – the role of parents when it comes to bridging the gap between the differently abled and the general school population, the importance of teachers' flexibility and the impact of governmental approaches to IE in the different contexts of our countries. All throughout, the importance of intercultural awareness and competencies is strongly felt, with our own preconceptions or a limited understanding limiting how we approached and learned from the events. IE can be approached in differing ways, and its definition depends strongly on the local context as well as the hegemonic interpretation. In the following theoretical reflection, we define IE and discuss its history in India. We also explore concepts such as visibility and context in IE and illustrate the importance of allowing space for reflectivity when discussing IE in intercultural exchange.

Inclusive Education

IE is certainly a topical phrase and a *must* to be included in all kinds of educational policies and speeches (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007; Peters & Besley, 2014; Thomas & Loxley, 2022). The understanding of the phrase, however, might not be the same for all who speak its name since the concept of inclusion is rooted in diverse disciplines, objectives, and epistemologies (Thomas & Loxley, 2022). Moreover, as acknowledged by Indian educational experts, the concept of IE is rooted in a particular context that is "universally considered as a Euro-American theoretical construct of utopia in academic debates" (Mukherjee, 2017, p. 38). This European-American focus will be referred to as the Global North. This section will therefore provide a very brief historical overview of the IE concept at the international level (read: Global North) and then how the Indian history of that concept has evolved in parallel. After discussing the different understandings of IE, we will turn to the future of the concept.

International (Global North) history of IE

IE was introduced into international law first with the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 1990, then supported with the *UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action in Special Needs Education* (UNESCO Salamanca Statement) in 1994 and with the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* in 2006 (Alzahrani, 2020; Peters & Besley, 2014). Since the *UNESCO Salamanca Statement* is considered to be the most influential policy for IE in recent times (Alzahrani, 2020; Ainscow, Slee & Best, 2019; Mukherjee, 2017; Parasuram, 2006; Saloviita, 2020; Thomas & Loxley, 2022), we will focus shortly on this document and its influence.

The *UNESCO Salamanca Statement* outlines that "schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities, and children from other disadvantaged or marginalised areas or groups" (UNESCO, 1994, p. 6). While this almost 30-year-old definition still conveys the concept of inclusion on a broad level, it is immediately followed by *special education needs,* referring in this framework to people "whose needs arise from disabilities or learning difficulties" (UNESCO, 1994, p. 6). Acknowledging that this framework was aimed to support action on special needs education, placing an explicit emphasis on disability, and an implicit connection between the concept of IE and the education of differently abled people, exercises a direct influence on the way different nation-states interpret the meaning of IE (Mukherjee, 2017). Also influential from this document is the ambiguous way special needs education is to be understood, leading to widespread deficit-oriented understandings and implementations (Ainscow, Slee & Best, 2019; Hodkinson, 2020). The deficit orientation, or the psycho-medical model of (dis)ability, sees differently abled people as in need of a cure, whereas in the social model the society's actions and beliefs are producing the disability and limitations and therefore should be responsible for removing the limitations, rather than passing the responsibility for implementing inclusion to differently abled individuals (Alzahrani, 2020). The preponderance of the deficit model (including in the UK and in India – see Hodkinson, 2020) renders radical actions to better IE difficult (Ainscow, Slee & Best, 2019). IE should instead convey, in line with the social model of (dis)ability, that "schools and teachers need to adapt and change

their practices to meet the needs of a more diverse school population" (Engelbrecht et al., 2013, p. 306). However, a vast body of literature about IE suggests that even decades after the *UNESCO Salamanca Statement*, societies from the Global North have not progressed as much as we think (Hodkinson, 2020). At the global level, neoliberal policies and discourses advocate for cost-effectiveness and curriculum standardisation, which come in direct contradiction with other global imperatives such as 'Education for All'. Having to negotiate this contradiction of the global policyscape at the nation-state level, individual nation-states craft their own local policies that, at times, carry this disjuncture or simply pick a side (Mukherjee, 2017; Thomas & Loxley, 2022).

Indian nonlinear history of IE

India gained independence from British rule in 1947, and since then, the central government responsible for education in the country has taken a number of initiatives to respond to inclusion (Parasuram, 2006; Sharma & Das, 2015). While expansive and radical inclusive education models have been proposed by Indian educational philosophers such as Rabindranath Tagore, postcolonial India generally neglected those native models in favour of ones from the Global North, in response to global economic and recognition aspirations (Mukherjee, 2017). Thereby, the current understanding of IE (with a UNESCO definition based on a Euro-American theoretical construct) in India stems from international discourses disregarding the local context (Singal, 2005). Policy borrowing from documents such as the *UNESCO Salamanca Statement,* which places differently abled children as the most excluded in any context, has led to a narrow focus on the meaning of IE and inclusion in India of children with different abilities (Mukherjee, 2017). This international policy interpreted at the local level is outlined by Sharma and Das (2015), reporting from the Ministry of Human Resource Development in 2003: "Inclusive education means all learners (. . .) with and without disabilities being able to learn together in ordinary preschool provisions, schools, and community educational settings" (p. 61). Here, it is clear that IE focuses on the inclusion of differently abled children in ordinary Indian schools, but it is unclear whether those children are indeed the most excluded in the Indian context, or if this focus is simply borrowed from a policy that stated so. A careful contextual assessment about which communities are indeed excluded and in need of inclusion in schools would be needed for a contextually relevant IE (Mukherjee, 2017), in India and elsewhere.

Nevertheless, with a stark Indian focus on IE needed most for differently abled children, Sharma and Das (2015) explain that national educational provisions for those children started with 1974's scheme about *Integrated Education for Disabled Children.* After that, a number of new plans and policies followed until, in 2009, the name of the 1974 policy changed to become *Inclusive Education of the Disabled at the Secondary Stage,* which marked an introduction to the concept of inclusive education. This was followed in 2010 with the act about the *Right to Education,* and this act was instrumental in the shift in what is considered a disability. Despite the acts in place, in 2015, only 1 to 4% of differently abled children had access to some form of education (Sharma & Das, 2015). It is therefore not surprising in this policy-borrowing context to find challenges in the implementation of this global policy at the local level, in any country. Many key challenges have been identified in the way to achieve the IE goals intended by the Indian central government in schools, and Sharma and Das (2015) identified challenges at the macro level such as the understanding of (dis)ability (as individual or societal), the conceptualization of IE (an international concept that has been borrowed in India without enough contextualization) and teacher education in India as inadequately preparing teachers to engage in such classrooms. Challenges at the micro level include the lack of resources, regular teachers' lack of familiarity with differentiation practices, and lack of supportive leadership, seen with many children denied admission to their neighbourhood schools despite the laws and acts in place. Those challenges are difficult to overcome in classrooms that often exceed 50 students for only one teacher and in a system where grades (and teaching to the test) are fundamental. Teachers might therefore struggle to imagine child-centric education and differentiation and to reimagine a class that prioritises wellbeing and inclusion over grades.

Context and visibility of disabilities in Indian education and educational context

One of the main themes we found when investigating the narratives was the visibility and context of disabilities. The context of our visit to India was limited to a small sample size of three different schools in the district of Pune in Maharashtra state. Any knowledge and insights gained are not necessarily applicable to other areas in India or even other schools within the district of Pune. Nevertheless, studies reveal that some overarching trends regarding invisible disabilities in Indian societies and educa-

tion can be observed (Ahmad, 2015; Fernandes, 2022; Srivastava, 2019). Particularly in India, invisible disabilities in conventional classrooms are often not addressed due to a lack of awareness and support in schools (Srivastava, 2019). Such a shortcoming in consciousness hinders access to resources like assessments or support and affects policy planning (Ahmad, 2015; Shah & Trivedi, 2017). In comparison, the Finnish educational system is more homogenous and universal, and it is a priority of the Finnish government to provide more quality resources to teachers and students (The Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, n.d.).

The promotion of inclusion in educational settings is often contingent upon the roles of stakeholders and contextual factors. This can affect, for example, teacher education towards the availability of official and private resources and understanding of the individual students whose needs are not directly visible (Fernandes, 2022). Furthermore, Johannson (2014) identified that teachers often consider the school's responsibility towards students with autism as limited to the transference of academic knowledge as opposed to including social development. This could contribute to social exclusion when children with invisible special needs are not able to follow the general curriculum or fulfil social developmental objectives. Fernandes (2022) connects this to the focus of special needs education in India, aiming at the reproduction of normativity instead of providing adaptations and flexibility to address the actual skills, needs, and capabilities of the students. Moreover, Srivastava (2019) suggests that a lack of teacher preparation may partially explain why teachers neglect students with special education needs in the classroom, contributing to academic failure and the non-fulfilment of societal expectations. This may not thoroughly explain every individual case, but it does necessitate a focus on teacher education.

Children can be excluded, othered, and become marginalised or disregarded by society when they are not able to meet society's expectations of normativity in the respective educational system (Hughes, 2009). Singal (2019) illustrates that children's perspectives are lost when they are excluded, whether on a smaller scale in families or on a larger scale in communities. Children are often not able to reclaim visibility after exclusion, which can lead to further problems in society outside of education when they grow older (Ahmad, 2015; O'Grady et al., 2010; Pandit, 2010). Considering the established long-term effects of educational exclusion and the connected societal exclusion of students with invisible special needs, different researchers have focused on the development of possible local and regional solutions. Shah and Trivedi (2017) provide multiple suggestions

in their article on how the local situation in the state of Maharashtra can be improved, including increasing awareness about specific learning disabilities. Kumari et al. (2019) also address this when rethinking teacher education in India. They differentiate in a two-sided "narrow" and "broad" approach, focusing on the promotion of inclusion of specific special needs education students as well as a change of mindset regarding diversity in the student bodies and school contexts, which could also affect the surrounding community.

Globally, the exclusion of special needs education students from general education classes can often be seen in countries with decentralised education systems as well as urban and densely populated areas (Pulkkinen et al., 2020). Learning from an African context, Mphahlele (2020) recognises the necessity of promoting locally driven inclusive education when planning and implementing change or interventions. This approach is expected to significantly contribute to a sustainable support model that will advance inclusive education practices and could be implemented in other countries and contexts as well.

Reflectivity in intercultural experiences

When engaging in intercultural experiences, it is crucial that before, during, and after, the participants are aware of their preset cultural, social, and geographical conditions. This section will question the view on international mobility as a neutral and knowledge-driven phenomenon (Morley et al., 2018), aiming to raise the question of *what kind* of *whose* knowledge is circulating in these mobilities. In this sense, our exchange had the goal to expand our knowledge on IE through collaboration between students from the Global North and the Global South, recognising that there might be multiple forms of knowledge and valuing this diversity, as well as the ambiguity it could precipitate.

Nevertheless, for this to happen, first we needed to deepen our cultural awareness (Bennett and Bennett, 2004). This included recognizing and reflecting on our own positionality as a Western academic group in a "modern"/colonial setting (Vásquez, 2015), by starting a process of humbling and unlearning relations to power and recognizing our knowledge as partial. Kirpitchenko (2015) and Jokikokko (2009) make it clear that this is possible through self-reflection. Reflecting can help us to see our own and others' views as simply different but of equal value. Even though we had read about IE and had experiences related to the concept, the international

encounter made us realise our understanding was incomplete and could be broadened. For this to happen, we needed to reflect on and be aware of the societal hierarchies in place. We had to adopt not only an openness to diversity but also the curiosity to engage with it so that we could be actively involved in the recognition and construction of shared knowledge.

Zuchowski et al. (2017) suggest that collaborative work between the Global North and the Global South might be perpetuating neocolonialism due to unequal funding and unequal knowledge production between universities from the Global North and the Global South. To deal with these hierarchies between universities, international encounters must aim at creating meaningful reciprocity through dialogue, relationship building, and power sharing to support genuine collaborative work. This is in line with Vásquez's (2015) idea on how global divides can be challenged through intercultural dialogue.

Meta-reflection

In line with reflective practice research (Mortari, 2015), we considered it fundamental to reflect not only on the practical aspects of our research work but also on the mental and emotional experiences that contributed to our broader understanding of IE and its practical meaning. Those mental and emotional experiences are central to this article, as can be seen in the narratives opening the text and the findings presented below. The findings arose from several iterative group discussions, first, about the experiences that spoke most powerfully to us as a group, which led us to establish key themes and to build related narratives together, such as IE. Second, the key themes were expounded in the theoretical section, and we then reflected on how those are connected to the themes of the narratives. While doing this mapping work, central findings emerged, such as the necessity of both theory and practice to facilitate genuine intercultural collaboration. Then, varying interpretations of national policies regarding IE can have counterproductive impacts when implemented in local educational settings. Additionally, we observed the importance of local actors in the implementation of IE and the potential of IE to change in order to fit the specific local environmental needs. This section will therefore expand on how our three main findings emerged, entwining narratives and theory.

As mentioned in the introduction, our group did a great deal of preparation work before the mobility part of the project, and we can claim as a

group to have a relatively developed intercultural mindset (Bennett & Bennett, 2004). Despite this, the barriers to true intercultural exchange were higher than we had anticipated: the preparatory readings, as mentioned in Narrative 1, were not on their own sufficient to facilitate genuine collaboration. However, as shown in Narrative 2, we learned that although abstract understanding is an important part of intercultural competence, it is also a skill that requires practice in real-life situations (Bennett & Bennett, 2004) as well as consistent reflection to develop (Kirpitchenko, 2015; Jokikokko, 2009). Spaces that allow personal or non-formal discussions provide opportunities for relationship building, as illustrated in Narrative 3. This encourages reflection during and outside of the workshops, challenging the knowledge hegemony and global hierarchies to become obscure or even completely disappear (Zuchowski et al., 2017).

At the policy level, the influential *UNESCO Salamanca statement* was compounded with special needs education, placing explicit disability emphasis with IE (Mukherjee, 2017). This limited outlook on disability, along with the policy manoeuvring, exacerbated the deficit orientation of disability (Ainscow, Slee & Best, 2019; Hodkinson, 2020). This could be partly seen in Narrative 1, where our Indian colleagues in the workshop agreed with the literature, which presented that IE in India was mainly about dealing with differently abled individuals. Even if the policies were to be changed at the international and national levels, the contextual and structural understanding that different practical actors have developed might be difficult to shift. This became apparent in practice when visiting the school discussed in Narrative 2. The policy aiming to include differently abled students does not resonate with parts of society, leading to differently abled students. This led to them being marked as "other" instead of a normal part of the school population. The reluctance of parents towards IE and the labelling of their children as attending an inclusive school mirrors the deficit orientation in IE policy planning and implementation (Ainscow, Slee & Best, 2019; Hodkinson, 2020), which leads to social consequences. The negative connotation of the term "inclusive" steered parents towards not wanting their neurotypical children to be associated with the school, fearing othering by society or a lack of quality of the education. While this became apparent to us in connection with the school in Pune, mentioned in Narrative 2, we realise that negative connotations of IE are not an Indian but a global issue (Hodkinson, 2020) that must be addressed worldwide, but in local contexts. The pervasive deficit-orientation model of disabilities focuses on the negative associations connected with the normalised ableism

we discussed in Narrative 3, instead of anchoring policy planning or implementation on the flexibility to support all students to embrace their full potential. On a classroom level, the deficit-orientation model of disabilities can prevent the successful implementation of policies (Fernandes, 2022; Srivastava, 2019), while many students do not even have access to IE despite supportive governmental strategies (Sharma & Das, 2015). Shifting policy amidst global incentives that are neoliberal and speak of education in terms of *efficiency* and *effectiveness* (Biesta, 2020; Thomas & Loxley, 2022), it is difficult to focus on contextual singularities, being under international/policy pressure. This is why we place much importance on contexts and challenge ourselves and others to reflect on policies locally and how they can best serve all students. With better examination of the aims we have for education at the local level, we can better define what we need for better inclusive education at the same level.

As individuals focusing on inclusive education, some of our first impulses were to evaluate what we saw in Indian schools through our Global North lens, despite our efforts to transcend it. However, in our reflection, our limited understanding and limited view discussed in Narrative 3 became apparent (Kirpitchenko, 2015; Jokikokko, 2009). This emphasised to us that educators and other actors are better positioned to determine what works in their own context and in the best interest of their students. Actors should be given the autonomy to create and implement models of inclusive education that best fit their students. Classrooms in which the surrounding structure already allows for a more flexible approach have supported this claim, as we touched upon in Narrative 3. The more adaptable that IE models become, the greater the opportunity for them to appeal to a wide variety of stakeholders in the relevant contextual realities. This also allows for adequate support regarding the specific visible or invisible needs of all students (Fernandes, 2022; Johannson, 2014) and challenges the widespread deficit orientation of disability (Ainscow, Slee & Best, 2019; Hodkinson, 2020).

Both our research and our experience show that many different definitions of IE exist (Alzahrani, 2020; Namanyane & Shaoan, 2021). As shown in Narrative 3, varied views can even exist in a single classroom. Our main conclusion is that there is no need to choose one specific definition of IE to prioritise above others. If IE is indeed a concept rooted in Global North theories, perhaps it is time to re-evaluate that the needs for inclusion are defined by specific contexts instead of merely borrowing hegemonic definitions and policies, which will inevitably be met with multiple incongruities when implemented in different contexts. This could minimise the resources

allocated to research done about why IE from the *UNESCO Salamanca Statement* is met (often in the Global South) with a plethora of challenges at the micro and macro levels (Fernandez, 2022; Sharma & Das, 2015). Inclusivity can take on different forms depending on the context of the school system, which can include factors such as geographic location, socioeconomic status, educational training and experience, or social and cultural traditions and beliefs (Namanyane & Shaoan, 2021). For example, our experience in India showed us the impact parents can have on the implementation of IE. Finally, in line with Artiles and Kozleski (2007), we imagine that it is important to shift the general IE understanding from one of offering access and participation in general education mainly to differently abled people to one of including all marginalized people. It is crucial to also include those whose needs are not immediately visible. Based on this, we wish to conclude this piece with a question to the readers that may spark avenues of interest for future research: How could IE be formulated/understood to enable all actors to support the learning of all students within their contextual realities?

Notes

[1] Audrey Paradis is a university lecturer in the Faculty of Education and Psychology at the University of Oulu. She is involved in research projects about antiracism and indigenous pedagogies.

[2] Jarno Slendebroek is a master's student from the Netherlands with a bachelor's degree in education and science.

[3] Leandra Ve Saskia Romey studies Education and Globalisation at the University of Oulu.

[4] Marianne Reuse has experience as a primary school teacher from Santiago, Chile, and as a master's student in Education and Globalisation at the University of Oulu.

[5] Md Abu Nayeem has a master's degree in Language Education and is pursuing a Master of Arts in Education and Globalisation.

[6] Laurel Seppälä studies in the Education and Globalisation programme at the University of Oulu.

[7] Albina Marchenko currently researches internationalization of higher education policies and practices, the well-being of students/researchers, and international students' mobility.

[8] Elizabeth Harlow is a master's student from the United States, studying in Education and Globalisation at the University of Oulu.

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