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Understanding the value of inclusive education and its implementation: A review of the literature

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Abstract European countries are increasingly committed to human rights and inclusive education. However, persistent educational and social inequalities indicate uneven implementation of inclusive education. This article reviews scholarly evidence on inclusion and its implementation, to show how inclusive education helps ensure both quality education and later social inclusion. Structurally, the article first establishes a conceptual framework for inclusive education, next evaluates previous research methodologies, and then reviews the academic and social benefits of inclusion. The fourth section identifies successful implementation strategies. The article concludes with suggestions on bridging the gap between inclusive education research, policy, and practice.

Keywords Inclusive education · Academic outcomes · Social inclusion · Inclusive practice

Inclusion is a complex and contested concept: researchers, policy makers, and practitioners debate what inclusive education is about, why it is necessary, and how it can be implemented. Several international organisations promote inclusive education as a right for all learners. Goal 4 of the UN *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (United Nations

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2015), as well as the most recent UNESCO guidelines (2017), affirm the human rights perspective by acknowledging inclusion and equity as overarching principles which should guide all educational policies and practices. Inclusive education is also prominent in key European documents (Council of the European Union 2018a; 2018b; Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights 2017; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2020). Given that learners with disabilities have experienced exclusion from education systems, other influential policy documents emphasize their right to inclusive education. In particular, Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006) defines inclusive education as "access to an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live", emphasising non-discrimination and preventing exclusion on the basis of disability.

In the academic literature, inclusive education is presented as an ideology (Allan 2014) that guides practice to respect the right of all learners to quality education. Booth (2009) noted that inclusive education focuses on increasing participation for all learners, creating systems that value all individuals equally, and promoting equity, compassion, human rights, and respect. Its other key aspects include increased placement in the mainstream classroom, equal opportunities for academic and social achievement, the implementation of inclusive pedagogies, and the creation of inclusive school communities (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2004; Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011; Göransson and Nilholm 2014).

Over time, inclusive education has consolidated its position as a moral and legal imperative. In this article, we adopt the current position statement of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (hereafter European Agency). The European Agency views inclusive education as a human rights issue that represents progress towards a more inclusive and equitable society. It stated: "The ultimate vision for inclusive education systems is to ensure that all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers" (2015, p. 1). Along similar lines, UNESCO (2009) advances three arguments for inclusion. Educationally, inclusion benefits all learners as it focuses on responding to diverse learner needs. Socially, it can ultimately promote a more fair society. Economically, inclusive schools are likely to be less expensive than segregated schools (UNESCO 2009).

Clearly, the ethical and moral justification for the human rights approach to inclusion has gained its theoretical ground. However, although inclusion has been repeatedly justified in theory, an area of great complexity is related to its evidence base. Arguments for the value of inclusion and for the practicality of its implementation often seem to be based on moral and normative principles. Dyson and colleagues note that past reviews of the research evidence in support of inclusion have been inconclusive, which indicates an inadequate research base for many issues around inclusive education (Dyson, Howes, Roberts, and Mitchell 2005). Lang and colleagues suggest that despite the international policy mandates and the accumulation of arguments in favour of inclusion as means for ensuring equity, the human-rights discourse has not yet managed to find its clear-cut implications for inclusive implementation (Lang, Kett, Groce, and Trani 2011). In that sense, a considerable gap still appears to exist between the stated purpose of inclusive education and the evidence of its effects. An important task is therefore to review research that provides evidence regarding the value of inclusive education. The specific question that we aim to address is: To what extent does research evidence support inclusive education and its implementation?

To answer this question, we provide research evidence related to the academic and the social justification of inclusion. We also use recent research evidence to highlight some vital components of successful inclusive implementation.

Methodology

In this section we document how the literature presented in this article was surveyed, evaluated for inclusion in the study, and synthesised to inform the article's conclusions. To identify evidence which validates the value of inclusion, we focused on research published mainly between 2015-2020 in three areas: a) the impact of inclusive education on academic achievement, with a focus on learners with disabilities, b) the social impact of inclusive education, and c) successful strategies for effective inclusive implementation.

All three authors of this article work with the European Agency, an independent organisation that serves as a platform for collaboration among Ministries of Education from European countries. The Agency promotes knowledge, policy, and implementation related to inclusive education, primarily through thematic projects addressing member countries' priorities. It also reviews and analyses member countries' policies, collects data and statistics, and helps countries develop inclusive education policy frameworks. Using the European Agency project database as a starting point, we initially selected seven literature reviews relevant to our areas of interest (i.e., academic achievement, social impact, and strategies for successful implementation). The majority of these reviews were published between 2015–2019 (two were published in 2003 and 2013 but are especially relevant) and they cover a substantial body of international research conducted since 1990.

We also identified new research through systematic searches of online journal databases (such as ERIC and EBSCO) and academic catalogues (such as SAGE and Taylor & Francis). Broader searches were carried out via general search engines, such as Google Scholar. We limited the publication dates to 2015–2020, with a few exceptions for particularly significant older studies. Since this article is addressed to policy makers, researchers, and practitioners, we included a broad variety of studies conducted by organisations and scholars in the field of inclusive education and other related disciplines. To process the vast amount of potential material, we focused on the most recent extensive systematic reviews and meta-analyses, longitudinal studies, and key case studies.

The main search terms were *inclusion, inclusive education, academic outcomes, academic achievement, social inclusion, social participation, social integration, inclusive practice, inclusive classroom, inclusive schooling, inclusive implementation,* and *evidence-based strategies*. These were combined with the terms *literature review, evidence, meta-analysis, synthesis, evaluation, impact,* and *effectiveness*. The search initially focused on material published in English, with an emphasis on European countries (Norway, Spain, United Kingdom, etc.). Eventually, it was extended to include non-European countries (e.g., United States).

Two caveats are in order. First, the research outcomes presented here may not be directly comparable due to different policies and practices or different definitions. We acknowledge the problems in transferring research findings from one national system to another, considering that inclusive education, mainstream, and/or specialist provision take different forms even within systems. Following a context-sensitive approach, we refer throughout the article to the country where the research was conducted. We likewise explore the challenge of synthesising diverse research contexts in our conclusion.

Second, a significant amount of research on inclusive education focuses on particular groups of learners that experience segregation, using a range of terms. This indicates different theoretical understandings and reflects different policy systems. In particular, special educational needs (SEN) are defined and categorised differently across systems. To move away from this constructed term, we refer primarily to research on learners with disabilities, but clarify where studies use broader or more specific SEN terms and categories.

The educational justification: Effects of inclusive education on learner outcomes

Much international and European policy literature points out that inclusive education can provide not only equal opportunities but also more equitable learner outcomes (European Agency 2017a; 2017b; OECD 2012; UNICEF 2017; SWIFT 2017). The effectiveness discourse is highly dependent on research that examines the relationship between inclusion and achievement. In fact, a number of empirical studies has considered the impact of inclusion on learner outcomes across a whole range of curriculum areas and different education levels.

Traditionally, studies on inclusion have examined the effects of inclusive placements for learners with disabilities, often identifying positive academic outcomes (Dyson, Howes, and Roberts 2002; Rea, Mclaughlin, and Walther-Thomas 2002; Waldron and McLeskey 2010a). For instance, Dyson et al. (2002) undertook a systematic review of the effectiveness of school actions for promoting inclusion in the United Kingdom. They concluded that "there is a limited, but by no means negligible, body of empirical evidence about the relationship between school action and the participation of all students in the cultures, curricula and communities of those schools" (p. 4). A later review by Waldron and McLeskey (2010a) examined the effectiveness of placement settings for learners with intellectual disabilities in the United States. The results revealed that these learners do not benefit from full-time, separate class placements. On the contrary, their academic and social progress is enhanced when placed in well-designed, organised inclusive classrooms.

During the last decade, a growing body of research literature has validated the effectiveness of inclusion on the academic outcomes of learners with disabilities (de Graaf, Van Hove, and Haveman 2013; Dessemontet, Bless, and Morin 2012; Dyssegaard and Larsen 2013; Hehir et al. 2016; Oh-Young and Filler 2015). Learners with disabilities tend to thrive best in mainstream settings, although this effect weakens during secondary education (De Vroey, Struyf, and Petry 2015; Dyssegaard and Larsen 2013). A recent meta-analysis by Oh-Young and Filler (2015) provided eight decades of evidence that learners with disabilities benefit when educated in inclusive education settings. In conclusion the findings show that "learners who received instruction in more integrated settings outperformed learners who received instruction in less integrated settings on assessments that measured academic and social outcomes" (Oh-Young and Filler 2015, p. 90). According to the authors, these findings suggest that "separate is not always equal" (p. 90).

Research has also assessed the outcomes of inclusive education for learners without disabilities. Including learners with disabilities in mainstream settings had no negative impact on the outcomes of their peers without disabilities (Dyssegaard and Larsen 2013; Farrell, Dyson, Polat, Hutcheson, and Gallannaugh 2007; Kalambouka, Farrell, Dyson, and Kaplan 2007; Ruijs and Peetsma 2009; Salend and Garrick Duhaney 1999). For instance, Dyssegaard and Larsen's meta-analysis (2013) confirmed that the academic and social

development of learners without disabilities is not hampered when learners with disabilities are included in the mainstream classroom. Similarly, Szumski, Smogorzewska, and Karwowski (2017) concluded that "attending inclusive classrooms is positively, though weakly, associated with the academic achievement of students without special educational needs" (p. 49). According to the researchers, this result provides important arguments in favour of inclusive education.

Finally, Hehir et al. (2016) conducted a systematic review of 280 studies from 25 countries, all investigating the benefits of inclusive education for learners with and without disabilities. Eighty-nine of the studies provided relevant scientific evidence and were synthesised and summarized. According to the findings of this review:

> There is clear and consistent evidence that inclusive educational settings can confer substantial short- and long-term benefits for students with and without disabilities. A large body of research indicates that included students develop stronger skills in reading and mathematics, have higher rates of attendance, are less likely to have behavioural problems, and are more likely to complete secondary school than students who have not been included. (p. 1)

The research evidence discussed here involves a diverse range of learners, across multiple education settings and school levels. These findings demonstrate the potential positive outcomes for all learners when inclusive education is well-designed and successfully implemented.

The social justification: Effects of inclusive education in the longer term

Inclusive education is not only about ensuring quality education while learners are at school. It is a prerequisite for social inclusion in further and higher education, employment, and life in the community. By promoting social inclusion, inclusive education better prepares learners for adult life. The literature defines social inclusion as a set of dimensions that are relevant to individual characteristics, relationships and social networks, active enrolment in school, employment, living in the community, and so on. Simplican, Leader, Kosciulek, and Leahy (2015) argued that social interaction and community participation are the key concepts in the broad term *social inclusion*. According to Cobigo, Ouelette-Kuntz, Lysaght, and Martin (2012), social inclusion is "(1) a series of complex interactions between environmental factors and personal characteristics that provide opportunities to (2) access public goods and services, (3) experience valued and expected social roles of one's choosing based on his/ her age, gender and culture, (4) be recognized as a competent individual and trusted to perform social roles in the community, and (5) belonging to a social network within which one receives and contributes support" (p. 82).

There is strong evidence that inclusive education is a prerequisite for the social inclusion of people with disabilities during school years and after graduation from school. In particular, a review of the literature provided evidence of the strong positive link between inclusive education and social inclusion in the areas of education, employment, and life in the community (European Agency 2018a). The analysis of research evidence indicates that being educated in inclusive settings leads to greater social and academic achievements in school, paid employment after school, and social life within the community. On the contrary, education in segregating settings prevents social inclusion in all areas.

Several meta-analyses, tracking studies conducted from 1980 onwards, agree that learners educated in inclusive setting have higher social and academic performance compared to learners educated in segregated or less inclusive settings (Baker, Wang, and Walber 1994/1995, Carlberg and Kavale 1980; Oh-Young and Filler 2015). Their findings are enhanced by longitudinal studies conducted in the USA by Baer et al. (2011) and Flexer et al. (2011), which show that learners educated in inclusive settings are more likely to enrol in higher education. The researchers noted that increased attendance in the mainstream class and transition programs of high quality both positively influence enrolment in higher education. All in all, learners who attend inclusive settings are more likely to have good social and academic skills that will enable them to continue their studies in higher education.

Research likewise suggests that learners who graduated from inclusive settings have more opportunities to be employed compared to young people who attended segregated settings. Two longitudinal studies from Norway showed that young people who were educated in inclusive settings had double the chances to secure paid employment after graduating from high school, compared to young people who attended special classes (Båtevik and Myklebust 2006; Myklebust and Båtevik 2005). Although these findings need to be contextualised (e.g., by considering how inclusive education is understood and implemented in Norway, the culture and attitudes in Norway, the nature of the open market and the quality of social services, etc.), it is worth highlighting the finding that more than 60% of young people educated in inclusive settings successfully achieved economic independence, compared to only 35% among those who attended special classes. Myklebust and Båtevik (2005) concluded that "placement in special classes is a risky venture" (p. 283), because it prevents the development of competences that would enable young people to be employed.

This is further supported by longitudinal research suggesting that learners who receive support in a mainstream class have a 76% greater chance to receive academic and vocational qualifications compared to learners attending special classes (Myklebust 2006; 2007). Moreover, people with academic and vocational qualifications are more likely (compared to those without them) to hold a permanent job. Apart from the academic and vocational qualifications that can be obtained through inclusive education, other variables also improve employment opportunities, such as participation in vocational education classes during the last two years of high school, participation in paid work experience while in high school, and participation in high-quality education and transition programmes (Båtevik and Myklebust 2006; Benz, Lindstrom, and Yovanoff 2000; Cimera 2010; Pallisera, Vilà, and Fullana 2012; Shandra and Hogan 2008).

Graduates of special schools, especially people with disabilities who graduate with poor education and no qualifications, are often pushed toward sheltered employment which prevents social inclusion. According to Gill (2005) "the parallel to special education and the sheltered workshop does not seem like a difficult one to make" (p. 621). The argument that sheltered employment is about teaching skills to enhance the employability of young people with disabilities is frequently used. However, Cimera's (2011) research, which compared two equal groups of people with intellectual disabilities rejects this argument. Self-employment and employment in the open market increase social inclusion and are options for graduates with academic and vocational qualifications (Lunt and Thornton 1994; Pagán 2009).

Living in the community after completing compulsory education is also linked with inclusive education. Inclusive practices can encourage learners, particularly those at risk of failure or leaving school early, to be part of their community, develop a sense of belonging, and become better prepared for adult life in their society (European Agency 2016b; 2019a). However, living in a community often requires living independently, being financially independent, and having friendships and social networks. According to the European

Agency (2018a), few studies examine the extent to which inclusive education leads to independent living in the community (Cobb et al. 2013). However, Symeonidou and Mavrou (2019) argued that the special education discourse and practice constructs "dependent" children who will likely become adults dependent on the social welfare system (Priestley 2000). Independent living is influenced far more by social policies than by school outcomes per se.

Along similar lines, being financially independent is linked with the likelihood of being employed, as discussed earlier. Qualitative and quantitative studies suggest that young adults with disabilities who graduate from inclusive settings are more likely to be financially independent shortly after graduation (Myklebust and Båtevik 2005; Skjong and Myklebust 2016). Longitudinal studies show that in the long term, about half of the people with disabilities who graduated from inclusive settings are financially independent by their late twenties and mid-thirties (Myklebust and Båtevik 2005; 2014). While inclusive education may not play a strong role in financial independence, Myklebust's (2015) study of 373 people with disabilities documented that schooling in special classes and support from teaching assistants correlate with dependence on social security, rather than on the kind of employment that leads to financial independence.

Having friends and social networks is another characteristic that is linked with living in the community. Kvalsund and Bele (2010a; 2010b), whose longitudinal study followed 500 young people with disabilities for eight years (from upper-secondary school until the age of 22), suggested that mainstream classes may lead to social inclusion in early adult life, whereas attending special classes is a risk factor and is more likely to lead to isolation. However, the negative effect of special classes is less evident about a decade after graduation (Bele and Kvalsund 2015; 2016), because social networks change and the "power of individual agency" (p. 215) plays an important role in one's life course.

So far, we have elaborated on the concept of inclusive education and have examined its effects on academic outcomes and longer-term social inclusion, highlighting its positive impact on learning outcomes, qualifications upon graduation, employment, and financial independence. In the second part of the article, we review scholarly findings on implementing inclusive education.

Towards successful inclusive implementation

By implementing inclusive policies and practices, schools can increase learner outcomes and ensure their social inclusion later in life. The literature identifies several interrelated factors in developing inclusive practice, including policies, financing, school organisation and leadership, school climate, classroom practice, curriculum design, teacher training, and collaboration (Loreman, Forlin, and Sharma 2014). According to the European Agency (2013), the inclusion process should build mainstream schools' capability to cater to learner diversity by providing support at three levels: school, classroom, and community. The following sections illustrate potential changes at each level.

Supporting transformational change in schools

School effectiveness is increasingly viewed from a systemic perspective that focuses on how education systems are organised and operate (Kinsella and Senior 2008). Arguably, a successful educational system "provides fair and inclusive education services which can lead to successful learning, engagement, wider participation in the community and

transition to a stable adulthood" (European Agency 2019b, p. 22). Such a system focuses on supporting the participation, learning, and outcomes of all learners by strengthening local mainstream schools' capacity to cope with change (Ainscow 2020; Fullan 2002). To effect successful school change, a key strategy is developing an inclusive culture (Ainscow and Sandill 2010; Dyson et al. 2002).

Research underlines leadership's crucial role in fostering innovation and promoting inclusive change (Ainscow and Sandill 2010; Fullan 2002; Harris 2012). This approach to leadership, also known as "transformational" leadership, promotes equity (European Agency 2018c) by emphasising setting a direction, developing people, and (re)organising the school (Day, Gu, and Sammons 2016). It suggests transforming schools into learning organisations to enhance learner outcomes (Kinsella and Senior 2008; Kools and Stoll 2016), and it encourages teachers and other educational professionals to regularly engage in collaborative problem solving (Ainscow 1999; Hehir et al. 2016).

Waldron and McLeskey (2010b) use the term Comprehensive School Reform to describe the process of "re-culturing" schools to become more effective and inclusive. Key aspects of this reform include developing a collaborative culture, using high-quality professional development to improve teacher practices, and leveraging strong leadership teams to support school improvement activities. Cooperatively changing the school organisation creates a culture of self-review and shared responsibility among its members (Waldron and McLeskey 2010b). It entails several processes, such as cooperative teaching, cooperative learning (e.g. peer tutoring), parental involvement, teachers coaching each other, and staff collaboration in instructional planning (European Agency 2003; 2018b).

Such collaboration requires organisational flexibility that encourages employees to share existing approaches and experiment with new practices (Ainscow 2020). This can develop wide professional learning communities that drive change and enhance learner outcomes. These communities should feature measures to address learners' health and well-being, flexible learning opportunities, shared leadership among staff, and active collaboration with families, communities, and local employers (European Agency 2016a; 2018b).

Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008) reviewed the impact of professional learning communities on teaching practices and pupil learning. They concluded that participation in learning communities makes teachers more learner-centered. This likewise benefits learners, as indicated by improved achievement scores over time (European Agency 2018b; Vescio et al. 2008). Teaching culture is also improved because learning communities increase collaboration, a focus on pupil learning, teacher authority or empowerment, and continuous learning (Vescio et al. 2008). As Flecha (2015) noted, "in schools that function as a learning community, teachers, families, pupils, and community members work in close collaboration to implement successful, evidence-based actions in their schools" (p. 6). This requires a central change of attitudes and values in all education stakeholders, to transform schools so that they can meet the needs of all learners (Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick, and West 2012).

Improving classroom practice

Dealing with diversity in the classroom has been one of the biggest challenges of educational systems. Evidence from several studies agrees that "what is good for pupils with special educational needs is good for all pupils" (European Agency 2003, p. 4). Teachers need to respond to individual differences, rather than relying on labels. To this end, inclusive

education can be used as an organising principle and a "mega-strategy" (Mitchell 2014, p. 27) to promote learner outcomes.

Inclusive pedagogy is a learner-centered approach to teaching and learning that aims to overcome differences between learners by extending the options that are available to everybody, rather than differentiating activities only for some learners (Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011). It avoids practices that involve comparison, ranking or labelling, and beliefs about fixed abilities (Swann, Peacock, Hart, and Drummond 2012). On the contrary, it adopts a "personalized" approach to teaching and learning where teachers adapt approaches and resources to each individual learner's needs (Rowe, Wilkin, and Wilson 2012). As Sebba, Brown, Steward, Galton, and James (2007) documented, several schools in England developed strong and cohesive personalised learning by promoting aspects of assessment *for* learning (i.e., formative assessment), learners taking more responsibility for their own learning, "genuine" learner voice, strong links with the community, and curricular flexibility.

A personalised approach is particularly important for dealing with behaviour, social, and/or emotional problems that form great challenges in inclusive education. When it comes to ensuring learner motivation and engagement, teachers should encourage a growth mindset among learners and understand that individual circumstances can require additional support (Dweck 2006; Lin-Siegler, Dweck, and Cohen 2016). To nurture resilient individuals, the European Agency (2019a) also suggests monitoring learner progress, developing close teacher-learner relationships, promoting positive teacher perceptions of learners, and employing fair disciplinary policies.

Implementing inclusive pedagogy also entails constant efforts to develop a truly inclusive curriculum and assessment practices. Along with attention to the structure and type of knowledge and skills within the curriculum, strengthening emotional intelligence and improving social skills are important in determining a learner's life prospects (European Agency 2018b). Allocating more resources to the subjects and skills that are tested reduces the time given to formative feedback and the development of learners' vital personal competencies (Muskin 2015). Yet formative feedback, including self- and peer assessment, is one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement (Hattie 2009; Looney 2011). It is therefore important for teachers to ensure a balance between on-going formative assessment and summative assessment, as part of everyday classroom practice (Faubert 2012).

Various empirical studies have identified specific evidence-based classroom practices for inclusive education. One of the most effective strategies is co-operative teaching between a range of professionals, within and outside school (European Agency 2003). In co-operative teaching settings, learners are given the opportunity to participate fully in their classrooms, while teachers have an opportunity to learn from each other. For effective co-operative teaching scheduled meetings and a clear division of responsibilities are important (European Agency 2003). Dyssegaard and Larsen (2013) evaluated inclusion strategies that have generated positive effects. Their analysis of 43 studies indicated that two-teacher arrangements in the class had a positive effect on all learners, and that collaborative teaching requires advance planning and in-service training.

A systematic review by Sharma and Salend (2016) analysed the use of teaching assistants in inclusive classrooms over the past 10 years. The results suggest that unclear professional roles, limited communication, collaboration with teaching assistants, and training teaching assistants led to ineffective and separate instruction that inadvertently undermined the inclusion, learning, socialisation, and independence of students with disabilities and the pedagogical roles of their teachers. These conclusions

are in line with other studies which have highlighted how support for struggling learners needs to be fine-tuned to benefit all the learners in the class (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2012; 2016; Farrell, Alborz, Howes, and Pearson 2010).

Peer tutoring or cooperative learning has also proven to be an effective strategy for increasing participation, academic achievement, and social interactions (European Agency 2003; Mitchell 2014). This evidence-based strategy refers to "learners working together in small learning groups, helping each other to carry out individual and group tasks" (Mitchell 2014, p. 43). It has proven to be beneficial for all learners in the class, not only learners with disabilities (Dyssegaard and Larsen 2013). A pre-requisite for co-operative learning is the use of heterogeneous grouping, a system of flexible and well-considered pupil grouping. It includes targeted goals, alternative routes for learning, and flexible instruction (European Agency 2003). Research on the effects of learner grouping has concluded that heterogeneous inclusion classrooms, where cooperative and dialogic learning take place, can improve academic achievement (Flecha 2015). On the contrary, ability grouping or traditional organisational differentiation, such as the system of repeating school years (also called "grade repetition" or "grade retention"), increase the differences between learners and perpetuate social class inequalities (Francis et al. 2017; Swann et al. 2012). Therefore, they are contradictory to the development of inclusive education.

Collaborative problem-solving is another effective strategy to promote inclusion. The teacher leads the learners through the steps of a structured process: learners are asked to identify the issue, discuss all possible solutions, screen solutions, and choose and evaluate the solution (European Agency 2003). According to a recent review by Hehir et al. (2016), "it is through the development of a culture of collaborative problem solving that the inclusion of students with disabilities can serve as a catalyst for school-wide improvement and yield benefits for non-disabled students" (p. 10).

One of the most comprehensive works on effective teaching approaches is Hattie's meta-study (2009) that compares the findings of many previous studies. Alongside formative feedback, peer learning, and peer assessment, Hattie's analysis identified two additional teaching strategies as the most effective for raising achievement: a) structured instruction/teaching (i.e., sequences with clear goals, identifying critical aspects of the subject in focus, mentoring, follow-up on the learners' understanding, summaries, synthesis, and repetition) and b) meta-cognitive strategies (i.e., the methods of studying, learning, building on the principles of organising an assignment for self-learning, self-evaluation, support from a partner, repetition and memorising, formulating goals, and planning for future learning).

In a nutshell, effective classroom practice that is based on inclusive pedagogy and combines ongoing assessment and evaluation, high expectations (European Agency 2003), and direct instruction and feedback (Faubert 2012) significantly contributes to learner success and the realisation of inclusive classrooms. It is equally important that teachers try out a range of pedagogical approaches that they can use flexibly in different situations, in order to improve their everyday classroom practice. In short, support in inclusive classrooms should:

> fit into the on-going details of the daily classroom instruction; be perceived by teachers as effective for students with disabilities as well as other students in the classroom; and enhance and build on the teacher's current repertoire of instructional practices. (Waldron and McLeskey 2010a, p. 37)

Engaging parents and the community

Developing an inclusive system goes beyond school organisation and involves the active engagement of key actors, such as parents and community stakeholders, in education-related processes. Numerous studies have evaluated models of parental involvement and its effects on academic achievement (Hill and Tyson 2009; Jeynes 2005; 2007). For example, Hill and Tyson's (2009) meta-analysis examined whether and which types of parental involvement are related to secondary school achievement. Across 50 studies, they found that learner achievement is positively associated with parental involvement that creates an understanding about academic performance, communicates expectations about involvement, and provides strategies that learners can effectively use. Homework assistance and supervising or checking homework was the only type of parental involvement not consistently related to achievement.

Research also indicates that promoting positive interaction with hard-to-reach parents is particularly important to support the learning, behaviour, and attendance of disadvantaged learners (Campbell 2011). Overall, studies on parental roles in learner outcomes agree that parental and family influence must go beyond shared activities and encourage policymakers and practitioners to consider flexible ways to enable parents to engage meaningfully in their children's education, develop services to improve parenting skills, address family factors that might affect motivation and engagement, and assist marginalised families (European Agency 2019a).

In addition to parents and families, the literature identifies support from the local community as a key factor in the development of inclusive systems (Flecha 2015). Community involvement in schools can have significant benefits for learner engagement and outcomes (Erskine et al. 2016) and generally safeguard against early school leaving, negative transitions, and poor life chances (European Agency 2019a). When external agencies and services—such as childcare facilities in schools, speech therapy, counselling, and mental healthcare—are in close contact with schools, learners can perform better. Improving the access to and availability of community-based support services could include specialist services to support all learners (e.g., health services, career support services, social services, etc.), particularly those at risk of failure. It could also include access to mental health services and therapeutic interventions for learners and teachers (European Agency 2019a).

In a study by Gross et al. (2015), community partners of all types identified school factors that they felt contributed to the success of their school–community partnerships. The most relevant factors were (a) strong school leadership, (b) inviting school culture, (c) teacher commitment to student success, and (d) collaboration and communication among partners. The study's findings indicated that community partners, such as employers, can benefit from their relationships with schools, developing their own staff and influencing a future generation of potential employees. School–community activities may also challenge negative attitudes about inclusion and lead to the school's inclusive culture and practices influencing the wider community.

Haines et al. (2015) combined the concepts of family–school and community–school partnerships and synthesised the findings of two original studies conducted in the context of the Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) Center's approach to inclusive school reform. This synthesis resulted in four main themes which can be considered when envisioning, evaluating, and strengthening family–school–community partnerships in inclusive schools: a) creating a positive, inviting, and inclusive school culture; b) building strong administrative leadership driven by a clear vision of inclusion; c) fostering the attributes of trusting partnerships; and d) providing multiple opportunities

for reciprocal partnerships and involvement for both families and community members (Haines et al. 2015).

In summary, forming optimal family–community–school partnerships should be seen as a vital component of inclusive education and as an integral part of systemwide improvement, facilitating all learners' progression from schooling years towards adulthood (European Agency 2019a).

Conclusions

In this article, we provided evidence from several studies to argue that inclusive education, when implemented successfully, can ensure the provision of quality education, improve learners' outcomes, and promote long-term social inclusion. By reviewing case studies, longitudinal studies, meta-analyses, and literature reviews, we aimed at disseminating knowledge about specific issues (e.g., academic and social impact) as well as methods for implementing inclusive education (e.g., inclusive school culture, inclusive pedagogy, inclusive curricula, etc.). As we showed, there is a large body of research that can inform changes at the system, community and school/classroom level.

Despite the abundance of research evidence on inclusion, not all stakeholders involved in education have a clear and common understanding of the values it represents, the benefits it can bring to all learners and teachers, the ways it can be implemented, and the systemic changes that need to take place. Indeed, it remains a challenge to use data and research evidence effectively, as "a lever for change" (Ainscow 2020, p. 4) that can promote inclusion at different levels (e.g., policy making for inclusive education, teacher professional development for inclusion, inclusive school cultures, inclusive practices at the classroom level, and communication and collaboration with families and communities).

In response, researchers need to contextualise their research, link it with international literature and contexts, and communicate their research to policy makers and teachers. Policy makers need to be convinced of the benefits of inclusive education and have a vision for promoting it. To this end, it is crucial to have access to research evidence that is clearly presented and to build bridges of communication and collaboration among all education stakeholders. Teachers at all levels of education, including headteachers, are equally important parts of the chain and they can implement inclusive pedagogies when they are ethically committed to inclusive education and when they are familiar with strategies that work for all learners. Therefore, employing research evidence in teacher professional development opportunities needs to be a key priority.

Research holds a central place in the educational and social justification of inclusive education. It is therefore important that it continues to be designed and implemented in ways that respects the right to quality education, participation, and achievement of all learners. At the same time, it needs to be communicated, appreciated, and considered by enlightened policy makers and reflective practitioners.

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