

Introduction: (Why) Should we reimagine special education?

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Background

This issue seeks to confront the challenge encapsulated in the notion of Special Education. This is a challenge which has been with us from before the days of compulsory education, intensified with the arrival of formal schooling for the masses and took on a new dimension as calls for inclusive education began to grow. It is about how we support people who have sensory, intellectual or physical characteristics that are marginalised by society and who face additional everyday challenges as part of their lived experience. Across all countries, similar numbers of children associated with such characteristics spend at least 80% of their time outside of the regular classroom, even in those systems which claim to have closed special education settings (E.g: EASNIE, 2024; Anastasiou et al, 2015).

Special education has two dominant historical strands arising in the minority world. The first strand emerged with the development of institutions for groups of people such as those experiencing a clearly visible sensory or intellectual difficulty. The second strand, sometimes drawing upon the first, emerged as a response to the failure of mainstream schools to provide for all. Both strands have led to separation and at the same time have seen calls for unified provision (Rix, 2015). The stories associated with these two strands have also been told in two very different ways. For instance, Stiker (1999) suggests disabled children can be raised up whilst Gulliford (1971) sees special schools as being brought “into closer relationship with the rest of education” (p3). In contrast, others describe special education as a form of social control (e.g. Wolfensberger, 1975). From this version of history come the tales of “survivors of the system” (Mason & Rieser, 1994, p25). Inclusive education arose largely in response to people’s experiences within this special system, within institutions that emerged from both historical strands. From the outset inclusive education sought to move away from an in-person deficit model of thinking about disability and recognised the capacity of systems and communities to create, maintain and police institutionalised notions of difference and responses to difference (Rix, 2015).

Inclusive education has in the last decades become a global education policy agenda. Different international policy instruments call for national governments to implement an inclusive education system, notably The Salamanca declaration and the United Nations sustainable development goal 4. These emphasise the need to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education. The Salamanca declaration, which has been instrumental in the global policy framework in the development of an inclusive education system, reiterates that an inclusive education system is: “the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, building inclusive society and achieving education for all” (UNESCO, 1994, p. iv), calling on all countries to implement policies and allocate resources to ensure that all children are educated in inclusive environments. The post-Salamanca declaration has seen countries across the globe transforming their education at varying pace to support an inclusive education system. Despite this movement towards the putting in place of inclusive education policies, special

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education ideologies are still recurrent in these policy formulations as seen in some recent studies examining inclusive education policies in different countries (e.g., Tah et al., 2024).

A simple narrative would say that inclusion has called for reconstruction whereas special education reinforced established structures. Yet from the outset of inclusive education it has been understood in relation to special education. Segregated provision (as it became known) was acknowledged to have a role in inclusion's founding document, the Salamanca Statement, even if it was seen to be an exception (UNESCO, 1994). The traditional notion of the continuum was at the heart of this call for inclusive education. It is unsurprising therefore that despite the huge number of laws, policies, codes of practice and international agreements that have emerged over the years, in most countries the initial enthusiastic narrative has been met by a continued and frequently resurgent role for special education in various guises. This is the lens through which inclusive education is so often viewed (Richardson & Powell, 2011; Hausstatter & Jahnukainen, 2014). It is also perhaps unsurprising that this has resulted in a multitude of local understandings of both special and inclusive education that reflect the nature of the established systems, available resources and dominant discourses (e.g., Weedon & Lezcano-Barbera, 2021).

Despite the efforts to implement an inclusive education system, special education is not going anywhere, if anything, it is strengthening. It is in this context that we want to ask questions about the nature of special education; to challenge the notion that it can be business as usual. Critical questions need to be asked, to rethink current/dominant understandings of special education and the doing of special education in a bid to effectively meet the needs of learners experiencing difficulties (with special educational needs) and make education meaningful to them as part of the whole. The focus here is not an attempt to re-think inclusive education and to suggest new ways in which it can be reconstructed. However, instead of focusing on failures and shortcomings of inclusive education, here we aim to see if it is possible to better understand and re-imagine the role and function of special education. How can we deliver its necessary transformation to effectively meet the needs of students with special educational needs and to offer them real/improved opportunities and outcomes in the educational system.

What are we suggesting? What is the problem?

The editors of this special issue are not advocates for a traditional form of special education and we would see ourselves as supporters of inclusion as provision for all within mainstream education, however we recognise the functioning of our dominant education systems sets up clear tensions between advocates of special education and inclusive education. It is possible to frame these as tensions between systems focussed upon ontologies of certainty and calls for systems focussed upon ontologies of uncertainty (Rix, 2023). Currently we tend toward ontologies of certainty to respond to the key dilemmas facing inclusive education. As Norwich (2009) pointed out these are dilemmas of identification, placement, curriculum and governance. In particular, whether and how to identify children who need additional support, where they should learn, what they should learn and who should decide these things. As a result, educational systems tend towards diagnostic approaches to place children within a continuum of provision studying an externally designed/approved curriculum within a top-down managed structure. This dominant set of responses, which are evident even in countries which claim to have got rid of special schools, permeates all aspects of the education system too, including funding, qualifications, teacher development and relationships between the diverse range of stakeholders.

The tensions between ontologies also place teachers in an impossible situation. As Allan (2008) identified, practitioners have to demonstrate they are both teaching at the required standard and open to ongoing learning, both autonomous and collaborative, both focussed upon results and ensuring an equitable experience, both knowledgeable about impairments yet not disabling people, both facing a

system full of exclusionary pressures but not becoming closed to the possibilities that inclusion offers. As a consequence of such aporias, teachers are often expected to enact a pedagogy underpinned by inclusive aims and principles, (e.g., focussed upon whole class activity and student strengths), whilst also adopting practices for learners identified with special educational needs that are associated with the special education paradigm (e.g., individualised seating arrangements and behaviour strategies).

It seems that, in response to these dilemmas and aporias, we continue to recycle old, familiar practices and policies, without achieving a true paradigm shift in how we understand education and its purpose (Woodcock & Hardy, 2017). This is further complicated by the vague definitions of both “special education” and “inclusive education,” which often allow practices focused on “fixing individuals” to be mislabeled as inclusive. This blurs the line between what constitutes a failure or success in either inclusive or special education. These inconsistencies in the meaning of special education are also reflected in research practices. The diversity of findings in the field stems from different interpretations of key concepts and contexts. While this diversity has value, it also creates challenges. It can lead to discussing different ideas as if they are the same, and it allows for selective citation, where studies are chosen to support pre-existing views without fully considering their meaning or context. This approach risks maintaining the status quo by avoiding critical engagement with evidence and hindering efforts to challenge established norms. Therefore, we propose taking a moment to reflect if we really changed the paradigm or we just constructed a new sidecar for our old educational practices.

In addition to all these issues is a strong criticism of the colonisation of an inclusive education predominantly influenced by western ideologies (for example, Muthukrishna and Engelbrecht, 2018; Walton, 2016). The dominant understanding and practice of inclusive education which has become the blueprints for inclusive education in the Global South is based on western ideas and practices and fails to take into consideration local contexts and social histories. There is therefore a powerful and necessary call for the decolonisation of inclusive education in the context of the Global South. More so, unlike in the western countries where inclusive education was established from a well-established and resourced special education system, an observation that is made in some parts of the Global South is that the implementation of inclusive education has actually led to the development of a special education system, where this was non-existent or limited. This decolonisation agenda while re-conceptualising inclusive education also exhorts a critical interrogation of the relationship between inclusive education and special education in the Global South.

Why are we not just saying reimagine education and inclusive education?

At the time of writing, the editors of this special issue have been in discussion about Reimagining Special Education (RiSE) with colleagues from around the world for three years. What has been evident at the start of many new discussions is a resistance to the notion of the challenge this special issue is posing. Many people feel for instance that we should not be focussing upon special education, that we should be assigning it to the basket of history and focussing upon how we can make inclusive education better. People have told us that they don't want to reimagine special education because they know ‘survivors’ of the special school system whose stories began to emerge in the 1970's and 1980's. Others have said that policy is clear in the direction of travel and so that is the direction we must follow to be relevant to the local context. However, all of these arguments have fallen away when we focus upon peoples' everyday experiences of education systems. People recognise that they are still held within the embrace of special education, that our general education systems are fundamentally entwined with the ideas, routines and practices associated with different forms of segregated provision, that we are living within a contradiction.

The aim of this open special issue is to provide a platform to better understand the roles and functions which special education plays within the general education system. To explore the value that it clearly provides and thereby to understand how this might be provided or replicated within an educational

context in which the focus is upon all learners learning together, not just as a matter of rights or economies of scale, but because it provides practical, empowering and motivating possibilities for everyone involved in education.

Some readers may wonder why we cannot simply align ourselves with other researchers and embrace previous attempts to reframe either inclusive or special education. For example, what is wrong with embracing the notions put forward by Hornby in *Inclusive special education (2014)* or the ideas proffered by Mitchell (2008) in *What Really Works in Special and Inclusive Education*. Why not accept the ideas behind Response to Intervention (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006) or an ICF-CY-Rights model (Hollenweger, 2011)? Could we not just argue for the notions behind the capability approach (Sen, 1985) or those put forward by Florian (2014) and Rufo & Causton (2022) when they outline how they are *Reimagining special education*? All of these ideas arise from well respected researchers within their field. They are coherent and are clearly located in well established theoretical paradigms.

The simple answer is that they all have their supporters, but none of them have seemed to move the dial and there is often evidence that they face fundamental challenges. It is possible to hypothesise about why this may be. For instance, at the heart of many of these is a positivist relationship with evidence. Calls for evidence-based practice arise from the same traditional model of certainty as both mainstream and special education (Rix, 2023). Just as mainstream systems seek to deliver set curricula, using formalised structures for allocating and teaching learners, with fixed targets of achievement, so too does special education use fixed notions of categories and process to allocate people to support. Building an evidence-base is simply another attempt to establish a sense of certainty when the reality of inclusion is uncertain. It flies against the reality that the marginalisation experienced by people within mainstream and special education is typically a result of them not fitting with the processes of certainty. It is repainting the sidecar, perhaps?

Another problem could be that these ideas arise from outside of education, from the fields of health sciences, human rights or economics, and have been imported in. Practitioners in schools do not seem to readily engage with the processes and practices envisaged by the theorists and researchers who bring these ideas into schools. The problem seems to be that because these are primarily non-educational constructs they have been redesigned to fit into the education world. The response of teachers therefore is that they require to be trained in 'it'. 'It' is not something which they can do as part of the day job. 'It' requires a special expertise. This, of course, is a problem well known to educationalists; the notion that more education is the solution to any identified social shortcoming. However, (stretching the metaphor far too far) it is also akin to strapping a waterski to the back of the motorbike.

A third potential underlying challenge associated with these approaches is that they tend towards the individualistic. They are not situated within the collaborative learning context of many classrooms or they are not responsive to particular kinds of cultural experiences associated with disability and schooling or they lack consideration of the participatory nature of learning. Their focus upon individual learners can be seen as an incomplete approach in the context of education. It is like focussing upon one small part of the motorbike without regard to the rest of it.

A final, possible challenge for these solutions is perhaps that they rely upon a dramatic shift in practice. It is not situated in where people are, but where they should be. They require things to be done with fidelity, or to think about children and learning in new ways or to organise how we manage teaching in ways that don't fit with the classroom or school as it is. They are (how far can you stretch a metaphor?) asking us to build and buy a completely new type of motorbike.

As authors we recognise the value in these reimaginings and can see that in an ideal situation they have much going for them, but the underlying premises behind all these approaches have been under discussion for many years now and as we have said before, the problem has not gone away, it has

become more intense. The kinds of ideas discussed above have had many influential supporters and considerable resources put behind them, but they have not reduced the challenges, they have perhaps exacerbated them. Clearly importing ideas from beyond education that are in tension with established educational practices and priorities is problematic, so too are oversimplistic, systemically decontextualised responses such as those that view teaching as a problem that can be resolved through ongoing training. Seeking entirely new ways of doing things does not seem to have worked, either. The possibility remains that, perhaps, we need to go back to basics. We need to go back to special education and start by exploring why it is such an essential part of the motorbike. Out of such an exploration might emerge... something unexpected.

What does reimagining involve?

An important question when framing a special issue around the notion of ‘reimagining’ is what we mean by that term. Simply critiquing existing solutions is insufficient; deconstructing them without offering viable alternatives risks leaving us with a void (Norwich, 1999). Therefore, for us, reimagining entails reflecting on both what is and what could be. It is about developing a deeper understanding of the past and present to uncover possibilities for the future. This process must include critical dialogue that not only problematises current systems but also explores proposed solutions to the contradictions and dilemmas those systems face.

By "critical," we mean questioning different courses of action, whether dominant or alternative. This includes interrogating concepts such as inclusive special education and special education and its various reinventions (such as Additional Support Needs or Exceptionalities), examining the ideological and ethical assumptions that underpin them (Dyson, 1999), and reflecting on their consequences. Such critical engagement can be uncomfortable, as it compels us to confront and question our loyalty to the values claimed by these various approaches.

Moreover, for meaningful change to occur, it is not enough to engage in critique among those who share similar perspectives, we “must not be afraid to meet people or to enter into dialogue with them” (Freire, 1968/2005). Yet, in our experience, dialogue between the fields of inclusive and special education is rare. Instead, separate communities, shaped by distinct traditions, often engage in discussions within their own arenas (e.g., different journals, conferences, or educational programmes), frequently presenting their perspectives as definitive and only truths. This antagonistic position leaves some perspectives and their proponents outside of the realm of possible interlocutors (Norwich, 2022). Genuine dialogue, however, requires recognising the legitimacy of differing positions (Todd & Sjöström, 2008).

Thus, before we can reimagine special education, we must first acknowledge it as a perspective with its own mental models, tools, and practices that deserve to be heard and understood. This understanding can only be achieved through critical dialogue—engaged not because we already know, but because we are curious to learn.

But, who should take part in these critical dialogues? This question leads us to consider who has a voice, who holds the power to influence decisions, and how that power is used. One example is the issue of parental choice. The views of parents who choose special schools are often dismissed as simply supporting special education and, as a result, are ignored in discussions about inclusion. But could these views offer important insights? By understanding the reasons, emotions, and expectations of these parents, might we find ways to better meet their needs within different educational settings?

The unease that arises when posing such questions is understandable; they bring uncertainty and challenge the loyalty we feel toward the values we uphold. However, avoiding these questions risks stagnation, turning inclusive education into a process of preserving dogma rather than pursuing genuine

transformation. At the same time, isn't openness to diversity at the heart of inclusion? Isn't the most important indicator of trust in the values of inclusion the creation of space for dialogue with diverse perspectives—and moving from merely believing to acting in line with those beliefs?

It seems important to situate this critical dialogue both within theoretical and empirical frameworks, adopting a range of methodologies in ways that acknowledge their limitations and capacity to maintain the status quo. This is particularly important in the context of special and inclusive education, given the underlying ontological differences. It is hard, for instance, for research focussed upon categories of disability to disrupt the underlying reliance upon certainty that underpins such a category.

One means of understanding the challenges we face and to help us seek out or describe possible alternatives is to develop new models and metaphors. This might involve models around funding, labelling or assessment, as well as new ways to describe the nature of provision or relationships within that provision. Perhaps what is needed in this reimagining and necessary transformation of special education are new theories that integrate these aporias/challenges/dichotomies into a new special education paradigm or an adoption of some inclusive education ideologies into special education to inform ways of understanding.

This is and should be more than a theorising agenda, it should actually propose possibilities for the transformation of the educational system with the overarching goal of making it more effective in the education of students with special education needs. Such proposals could therefore include but not be limited to policy changes, reconceptualisation and redefinition of what is meant by special educational needs and a re-description of the population, the redesign of instructional and assessment strategies or service delivery in schools, or the better involvement of parents and communities in the education of students with special educational needs.

This critical dialogue to re-imagine special education must also engage the important issue of competencies of teachers and other actors in education, as well as their collaboration and professional development, both in-service and preservice. At the same time, there may be a need to attend to school leadership, which would be supportive for these envisioned changes.

In this context this special issue seeks to explore whether we need to reimagine the nature of special education rather than seek to consign it to history. We wish to consider the possibility that inclusion has re-legitimised special education and become a barrier to special education's necessary transformation through creating space for critical dialogue.

This special issue wants to bring together papers that explore how the traditions and practices of special education are maintained, adapted, or re-legitimised, while also considering practical approaches to address persistent challenges. We encourage contributors to reflect on the future of special education and alternative models that address unresolved dilemmas in education.

Within this special issue, we hope you will encounter discussions around questions such as: Why does special education fill gaps that inclusion does not? Are there aspects of special education worth preserving and redeveloping? What transformations could occur if special education were reframed around principles of participation and social justice, rather than inclusion alone? How can diverse perspectives across the sector help us understand the field's challenges and opportunities? And finally, what underexplored areas of research could drive significant changes in special education?

In addition to presenting these thought-provoking contributions, we see this special issue as an invitation for further critical dialogue. We encourage readers to engage with these dialogue—whether by building upon the ideas presented here, challenging them, or contributing fresh perspectives to advance the ongoing conversation.

This issue will remain open for new contributions.

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