Inclusive Education is not Dead, it just Articulates Differently. Approaches and Pitfalls to the International Comparison.

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Abstract

CONTEXT: Over the past three decades, inclusive education has evolved into a global paradigm embedded in the policies of international organizations and reflected in major agreements such as the Salamanca Statement, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), or the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While aiming to combat discrimination, marginalization, and foster participation for all, inclusive education faces increasing political resistance and varying interpretations across cultural and national contexts. This diversity of interpretations has rendered inclusive education a fuzzy concept, posing significant challenges to international comparative educational research.

APPROACH: This special issue addresses these conceptual and methodological complexities and engages with the further development of the methodology and conception of international comparative research on inclusive education. The selected contributions engage in differing ways with the question of how such research can be conducted appropriately and, thereby, focus on a specific challenge in international research on inclusive education.

FINDINGS: The challenges addressed by the included contributions include the following topics:

- The problematisation of knowledge production regarding the dominance and unequal power relations between the Global North and the Global South, as well as the question of how participatory, dialogical, and postcolonial research approaches can manage these power relations methodologically.
- The use of 'culture' as a concept in research, considering the rarely explicitly addressed role of culture as a methodological reference point in international inclusion research.
- The use of 'participation' to measure inclusion in early childhood education, and the need for, but also the difficulty of achieving, a shared understanding in international research.
- The challenge of translatability in systematic reviews and the need for transparent and critically reflexive review processes embedded therein.
- The terminological ambiguity in 'diagnostics' and 'assessment' (as central concepts in the context of inclusive education), and the challenge of translating terminologies in other languages without losing their local and language-bound context.

CONCLUSION: The included contributions give a detailed insight into research practices and highlight the complexity of doing international comparative research on inclusive education. On the one hand, comparative research should be aware of topic-specific issues such as the challenge to deal with normative debates surrounding inclusive education, its impetus for social change or the change of power relations. On the other hand, awareness of general challenges in international comparative research is needed, such as translation of terminologies between different contexts, or varying methodologies and research practices.

Points of Interest

- During the last three decades, inclusive education has become an important concept to combat discrimination, marginalization, and foster participation for all in educational contexts.

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- Despite its relevance, inclusive education faces increasing political resistance and varying interpretations across cultural and national contexts.
- The diversity of interpretations poses significant challenges to compare developments between nation states.
- This special issue addresses these challenges and engages with the further development of the methodology and conception of international comparative research on inclusive education.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, International Comparative Research, Methodology

1 Introduction

Inclusive education can be described as an international paradigm that, on the one hand, has been incorporated into the policies of international (educational) organizations, such as the European Union, the OECD, UNESCO or the World Bank (Kiuppis, 2016; Ydesen, 2019; Zahnd, 2021) and has gained significant visibility through international agreements, such as the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education of 1994, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of 2006 and the UN Sustainable Development Goals of 2018 (Köpfer et al. 2021a). On the other hand, while the international discourse would include the demand to implement inclusive education on a national and regional level, inclusive education has become a more controversial topic recently. The efforts to dismantle (historical) developments in the context of disability, equity, and inclusion (DEI) by specific political parties (Zembylas, 2020) have a profound impact on the local implementation of inclusive education. Consequently, the task to adopt the normative (pro)position into national and regional educational policies has become more challenging, and in some countries even got cancelled or reversed. Notwithstanding actual DEI-struggles, the translation of inclusive education into different educational systems with differing historical developments, distinct cultures, normative and legal foundations always was an elusive process characterized by half-hearted attempts at implementation (e.g. Banks, 2025; Done, 2025). In this process, inclusive education has become a fuzzy or slippery concept, meaning that it is difficult to define or operationalize it in a clear and precise way (Artiles & Dyson 2005). As this fuzziness might be seen as a problem for developing inclusive education systems, it also is one for international comparative research regarding inclusive education. Facing the differences of educational systems, of existing national data sources, and of the way inclusion gets implemented, the task of comparing inclusion and participation between educational systems is challenging. This special issue is directed towards these challenges and aims to collect contributions which discuss methodological challenges embedded in international comparative research on inclusive education and reflect on ways to deal with them.

2 Story behind this special issue

The concept for this special issue started to grow a few years ago. Since 2014, researchers from Germany, Austria, Luxembourg and Switzerland, interested in international comparative research on inclusive education started to meet and exchange on a yearly basis in Berlin and Luxembourg. It eventually led to the founding of the DFG-funded scientific network "Inclusive Education: International and Comparative Perspectives" (2020-2024, DFG project number 427476584)[2]. Its aim was to explore how the transformation towards inclusive educational systems, reaching from global to local levels, can be studied in an internationally comparative manner. Within the network, different theoretical and/or methodological approaches have been compared and discussed with experts from the international arena to analyse the potentials and limitations of different approaches for international comparative (educational) research.

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The idea for this special issue was born specifically at the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) 2023 in Glasgow where some members of the network held a research workshop under the title "Inclusive Education is not Dead, it just Articulates Differently. Discussing Approaches and Pitfalls to the International Comparison" in Network 4 'Inclusive Education'. This editorial and the contributions to this issue aim to stick to the idea of that workshop and initiate a theoretical and methodological discussion that deals with the challenge. Thus, based on the preliminary work and research of the network, which has already been published in the *Handbook of Inclusion International* (Köpfer et al., 2021), the analytical focus of this special issue is rather put on the development process regarding the international comparative research discourse on inclusive education (i.e., how can international comparative research be done?) than on the implementation process (i.e., results of a comparison of educational systems).

3 Inclusion as a slippery concept: Challenges in international and comparative research

According to Ainscow and Miles (2008), inclusive education is oriented towards the goal of reducing marginalization, disadvantages and discrimination, and fostering participation for all children and young people — including all groups of people "seen as being vulnerable to exclusion". However, the extent to which regulative, normative or ideational change affects educational policies, programs, and practices requires in-depth comparative-historical research to uncover the taken-for-granted aspects and mechanisms of (non-)change on various levels in such contexts. Numerous studies, using approaches such as neo-institutionalism (e.g., Biermann, 2022; Powell, 2011, 2016), educational sociology (Tomlinson, 2017), comparative-historical sociology (Richardson & Powell, 2011), or new materialism (Naraian & Amrhein, 2020) have shown how divergent the inclusion-oriented transformation processes are in different countries and cultures (and also within these countries, see, e.g., Gasterstädt, 2021; Mejeh, 2021; Schäfer, 2021). Processes of recontextualization arise, especially with regard to the persistence of special education support systems and their inherent logic of pursuing segregation or separation by means of specific supports provided in particular institutionalized organizational settings, such as special schools or classes, that reflect contrasting "institutional logics" of segregation, separation or inclusion (Done, 2025; Powell, 2016; Tschanz & Powell, 2020; Zahnd & Oberholzer, 2025).

Despite the divergent interpretations and implementations of inclusive education, 'glonacal' debates on inclusive education (generally) use the human rights discourse as a common anchor point. For example, debates on inclusive education during the last decades have been largely influenced by the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UN CRPD). However, the global human rights discourse in itself historically evolved over time and so did the understanding of inclusive education (Kiuppis, 2016). Comparing the Salamanca Statement published in the 1990s with actual policies as represented in the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on "Quality Education" shows how the understanding of inclusion has become more nuanced and detailed over time – especially regarding the awareness towards marginalized groups. Simultaneously, inclusion and inclusive education are sometimes specifically framed as concepts for disabled people (e.g. UN CRPD) and for all marginalized groups (e.g. SDG 4). On a national level, again, very different interpretations of the global human rights debates within cultural contexts as well as contrasting implications for educational policymaking and practices are observable (see Biermann, 2022 on Germany and Nigeria). Furthermore, debates on inclusive education in national contexts also intertwine with local policies and law.

In the context of various interpretations, researchers made attempts to systematize definitions and understandings of inclusive education. For example, already a decade ago Göransson & Nilholm (2014) systematize inclusion definitions from the international literature along four central patterns: (A) Placement definition: inclusion as placement of pupils with disabilities/in need of special support in general education classrooms; (B) Specified individualised definition — inclusion as meeting the social/academic needs of pupils with disabilities/pupils in need of special support; (C) General individualised definition — inclusion as meeting the social/academic needs of all pupils; and (D) Community definition — inclusion as creation of communities with specific characteristics. These models clearly show that there are trade-offs and ambivalence in targeting either specific groups of people (usually marked as needing special education or support) or, with a generalist perspective, rather all pupils. Either inclusion is connected with 'more' specificity and specific support or with a generalist perspective on the individuality of each pupil and a

community orientation derived from this. A further systematization by Köpfer (2019, see also Badstieber et al., 2022) follows on from this, which also proposes a distinction between four different conceptual understandings of inclusive education (see figure 1).

Figure 1: *Conceptual Mapping of Inclusive Education Research (Source: Badstieber et al., 2022)*
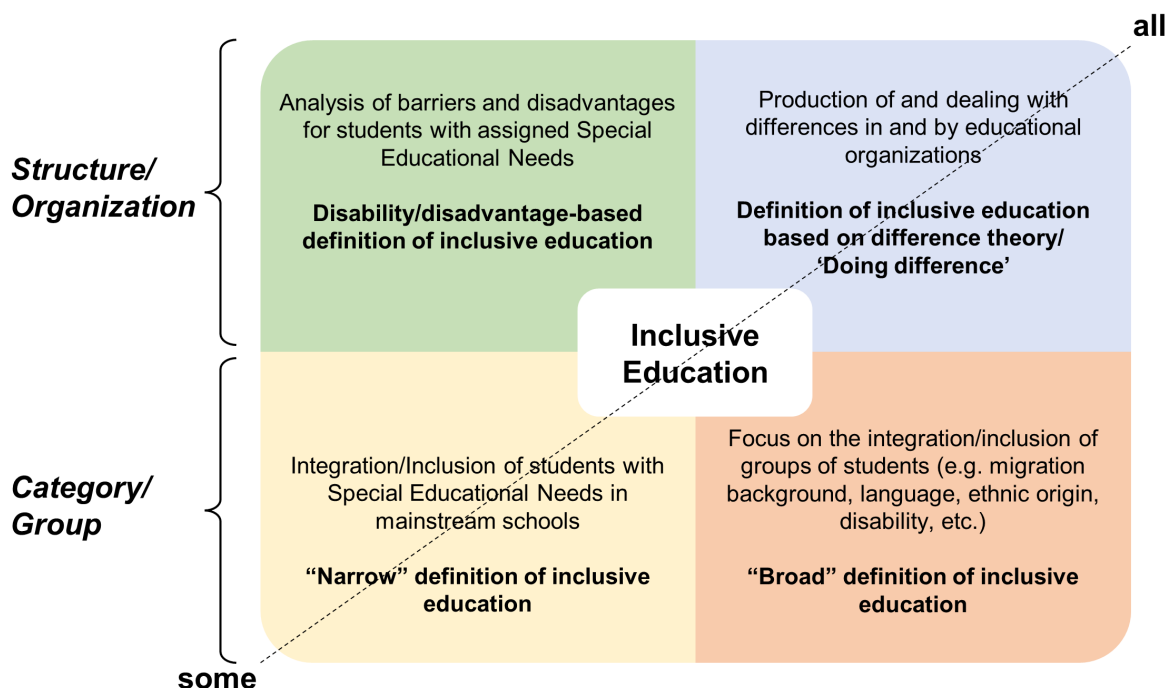
In this systematization, the focus is on inclusive education as a human right, which is increasingly addressed in the research discourse on inclusion in different ways. Although there are overlaps within the distinctions, a horizontal distinction can be made between an understanding of inclusion that focuses on the integration or inclusion of students with special educational needs in general schools and an understanding that also takes other/all dimensions of heterogeneity into account (e.g. migration background, language spoken, etc.). Both perspectives have in common that they ascriptively define one or more clearly distinguishable group(s) of people who are then put in relation to a group implicitly assumed to be the norm. The characteristic of difference is thereby ascribed to the group in the sense of a classification, which entails the potential of ontologisation and stigmatisation of the group as well as the reification of disability (or other person-related characteristics) by inclusion research (Messiou, 2017). In the diagram, these individual- or person-group-related perspectives are above supplemented by a level that focuses on the structures of disability and on productions of difference. In this context, a distinction can be made between an understanding of disability that – represented by disability studies – directs the perspective to (the materialisation of) 'dis/abling' structures and practices within which persons with diagnosed disabilities are hindered or enabled in their learning and development across the life span through their assumed and attested norm deviation (Weisser, 2017). The need for transformation is thereby attributed to structures. Finally, a structure-oriented perspective on inclusive education can be distinguished that focuses on the production and processing of differences. In this difference-theoretical perspective, disabilities and disadvantages are understood as products of the structures, cultures, and practices of a field that affect all stakeholders (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). Diagonally, the focus on groups of persons maps a continuum of 'some' and 'all' and refers to the group of persons implicitly or explicitly addressed in inclusion research. This distinction is – as Messiou (2017) also states – of central importance, especially for inclusion research, as it can be critically questioned, "If inclusion is about all, why do we still mostly focus on some?" (ibid., 152).

Regardless of these contributions targeted at conceptual clarity, debates on inclusive education do not always sufficiently signpost which inclusion-oriented positions and concepts they are building on (see

overview in Köpfer et al., 2021). Consequently, they contribute to making inclusion a slippery and fuzzy concept. However, dealing with conceptual clarity only represents the tip of the iceberg in international comparative research. Research on the comprehensive goal of inclusive education contains far more challenges that are linked to inclusive education's overarching attempt to address global, national, local as well as individual practices, and the complexity of societal structures. Thus, international comparative research in the context of inclusive education should be aware…

- of *normative debates* surrounding inclusion and inclusive education, including especially human rights based positions, locally existing (legal) framings and the contradictions in normative debates;
- of the relevance to interpret inclusive education as a specific concern in the context of its aim to contribute to an *inclusive society*;
- of the impetus for *social change* embedded in inclusion and inclusive education, including the change of power relations on global and local levels, the emancipatory potential regarding marginalised groups, and the relevance of these aspects for knowledge production;
- of the challenges to *translate* inclusion between global, national, and local levels, the problem of translation and context-dependence (e.g. culture, politics, institutions) and the struggle to define the role of 'culture' in these processes;
- of the *plurality of understandings* resulting from varying theoretical approaches towards inclusion/inclusive education and related concepts — e.g. participation, discrimination, equity, equality but also 'inclusive didactics', 'inclusive assessment' —, the relevance to relate the theoretical approaches and concepts, and the challenge to translate different concepts between languages;
- of *methodologies and research practices* valuing the emancipatory potential of inclusion (including their impetus for power-relations and knowledge-production) and being able to include all marginalised groups;
- of the complexity to deal with *classification, categories* and the problem of normativity and reification (i.e. in context of knowledge production process or data production);
- of the multitude of *barriers for inclusion* on structural and individual levels and practices relating to them.

While this list appears to be impressive, the mentioned challenges are a non-exhaustive attempt to open the discourse space for the contributions of this special issue.

4 Outlook on contributions

This issue is directed towards methodological and theoretical reflections on international and comparative research on inclusive education. Thus, the contributions do not evaluate approaches in the sense of best practice but discuss which challenges become evident in international comparative research and what kind of approaches (methodological/theoretical) could be helpful to tackle them. Here, questions could be asked about *how* inclusive education is articulated in the research discourse, *which* categories and strands of discourse in educational sciences as well as other multidisciplinary discourses are connected to the thematic complex of inclusive education, and *how*, against this background, knowledge production and data processing are carried out. Therefore, the upcoming contributions focus on options and opportunities to conduct international comparative research on inclusive education and theoretical and methodological challenges involved in such research designs and, thereby, address several of the above-mentioned challenges from different perspectives.

Victoria Mehringer and *Yahya El-Lahib* examine how knowledge production creates and maintains colonial dominance and unequal power relations between the Global North and the Global South with a focus on the context of international inclusive education. In their contribution, the authors reflect on the question, how participatory research approaches can methodologically manage these power relations in the international setting. To answer this question, they start with an elaboration on how dominant Eurocentric scholarship and knowledge has created processes of othering to justify the supposed superiority of knowledge and practices from the North and the assumed inferiority of knowledge from the South. They point to the importance of understanding how the production of knowledge, in the colonial past and beyond,

is shaped by power relations and to the importance of addressing colonial impacts on practices that affect marginalized social groups. Further on, they argue that these power imbalances influence intercultural and international research projects, especially in the field of inclusion and disability. For example, despite extensive knowledge about disability in the Global South, Eurocentric and Western knowledge production is largely dominated by the Global North. Furthermore, they show how power imbalances — even if constituted differently — are also evident in national research contexts of inclusion and disability between academic researchers and people with challenging life experiences or disabilities. Against this backdrop they argue for participatory research that is dialogic, critically reflective and collaborative and that includes the potential to address and mitigate some of the mentioned colonial power imbalances in the field of inclusive education. The key message of the contribution is that a fusion of postcolonial theories, participatory research and disability/inclusive education provides a basis for initiating a paradigm shift.

Andreas Köpfer and *Michelle Proyer* start with the observation that only few publications in the context of international comparative research do not refer directly or indirectly to culture. Be it society as a cultural entity, questions of inclusion in schools that are embedded in cultural, political and social conditions or culture as the explicit framing of an overarching regional context. Using this observation, the authors reflect on the long tradition of raising cultural questions in the discourse on inclusive education and point to the astonishing fact that culture as a comparative entity has so far rarely been explicitly picked up as a methodological issue. Similarly, they point to the fact that questions of using and dealing with categories (e.g. dis/ability) against the background of cultural differences and commonalities have hardly been addressed. In their contribution, the authors take this as an opportunity to explore methodological challenges in cross-cultural comparison. Based on mapping different understandings of culture, they describe cross-cultural comparison as a methodological approach. In doing so, they elaborate ambivalences of cross-cultural comparison in the field of inclusive education and illustrate this using exemplary articulations of culture from an exploratory scoping review of inclusion-related journals and derive considerations for cross-cultural inclusion research as a methodological approach.

Janina Dott and *Ulla Licandro* focus on young children with disability and evaluate the potential to use participation as a lens to measure inclusion internationally. In doing so, they describe participation as a requirement as well as the main outcome of inclusion and as a way to evaluate inclusive education. On the one hand, the contribution discusses the importance of participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC) regarding quality of life and to foster a child's development by providing structured learning experiences and supportive interactions during critical formative years. On the other hand, they show how the exact framing and operationalisation depend on the context and measurement is inconsistent. Participation may have a different meaning for different people, including children with disabilities. Consequently, they point to a need for a common understanding of participation in inclusive ECEC to support the comparison of findings between studies. Based on their conceptualisation of participation, the authors can identify similarities in the assessment of participation in international studies and provide recommendations for further research on inclusive ECEC. Furthermore, they discuss the importance of reflecting the interrelations of the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrolevel to fully understand how to measure and improve the possibilities children with disabilities have for equal participation.

Julia Frohn uses the case of a review on the topic of 'inclusive didactics' to reflect upon the process of conducting a systematic review in the field of inclusive education. Her reflections are based on the notion of translatability to register and critically analyse how a review process can take shape. In adopting this research approach, she first reflects on possible (mis)translations between the terms 'Didaktik' and 'didactics' as well as between different meanings of 'inclusive education'. Afterwards she introduces the purposes, challenges and potentials of systematic reviews in educational research, defining them as a reinterpretation of — qualitative and quantitative — data in the sense of a conceptual translation. On this methodological basis, she presents her steps during the systematic review and discusses the difficulties in translating the research question into a conceptual framework. In laying out her search strategy, she gives insights into reflections on coding and synthesising results. Her results point to translational challenges between cultural contexts and geographical regions, between different methodological registers, and between original studies and review results. The analysis also shows that international reviewing must acknowledge inequalities in representation and academic knowledge production across the globe, calling

for a reflective approach to seemingly objective results. Finally, the author emphasizes the need to critically reflect on one's own role in systematic reviewing and on the translational processes involved, arguing in favour of a transparent presentation of the process that still leaves room for individual or unconventional approaches.

Katja Beck, *Dieter Katzenbach*, *Sophia Laux* and *Michael Urban* turn towards the fuzzy nature of terminologies in the context of assessment — a crucial component in the development of inclusive education. Thereby, they specifically address the challenge of translation in international contexts. Against the backdrop of historically developed, and language-specific discourses on assessment, a simple translation into the English-dominated scientific discourse is challenging. Terms cannot be translated literally, nor be understood detached from their specific local and language-bound context. In using the case of their research project *Förderbezogene Diagnostik in der inklusiven Bildung* (support-related diagnostics in settings of inclusive education), they discuss existing challenges in linking a local and language-specific concept like 'förderbezogene Diagnostik' with international debates (that are predominantly English-speaking). To do so, Katja Beck and her colleagues exemplify their work on a systematic review of international literature as an attempt to gain an understanding of what is being researched under the terms 'diagnostics', 'assessment', and 'measurement' in relation to inclusive education. In their chapter they document and reflect on the method and the conceptual design of the systematic review. Regarding the topic of the review, they are able to show that patterns prevalent in the German discourse are reflected in English research across diverse international contexts. As a consequence, they suggest the existence of shared challenges and opportunities and underscore the potential for international collaboration in the field of inclusive education.

We hope you enjoy reading the articles in this special issue.

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Disclosure statement

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