

Editorial

Special and Inclusive Education: Perspectives, Challenges and Prospects

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For around 40 years, there has been intense debate about how to best educate learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) [1,2]. Competing paradigms of special education and inclusive education have been developed, disseminated, and discussed at length over the years. It is considered that discussions need to be focused on the effectiveness of these two competing approaches to educating learners with different types and severities of special educational needs and disabilities. Therefore, the aim of our special issue of *Education Sciences* was to focus on the latest issues, as well as current international practices and research relevant to special education and inclusive education. We sought new ideas and potential ways forward for special and general education practice, as well as possible future research directions, in order to enable the community of scholars, policy makers, and practitioners to consider the latest thinking on these topics.

The historical and contemporary context for this project is one of attacks on the very existence of special education that have culminated in the call for its elimination [3]. The confusions, myths, and distortions that have led to this state of affairs have been discussed in a recent chapter [4], and some of the key issues are highlighted in the Special Issue. The most fundamental issues are, first, the nature and degree of variability in the diversity we call disability compared to other diversities (e.g., gender, color, place of origin, religion, tribe, social and economic status) and, second, the nature of education and the special implications of disabilities for this.

Among ideas about special and general education is the notion that general education can be reformed or transformed into a social project that makes special education irrelevant or unnecessary. It is believed by some people that the success of this reformation or transformation will eliminate what we call special education. An alternative view is that special education needs improvement, as does general education, but that it will always be needed and, therefore, must be preserved if we are to have social justice in education, and effective education for children with SEND.

Kauffman and colleagues [2,4] point out that inclusive education gained momentum following the widespread implementation of neo-liberal economic and social policies by President Reagan in the USA in the 1980s. Those neo-liberal policies have continued to be influential in many countries for more than 40 years. They emphasise free-market economics that has translated into education policies that have led to cuts in programs for vulnerable children, including those with SEND. Some countries have implemented these cuts by using the theories underpinning inclusive education to promote education in mainstream schools, thereby justifying the closure of special schools and classes and/or reducing levels of support for children with SEND. Thus, it may well be that neo-liberal economic and social policies have dovetailed with the promotion of inclusive education to undermine special education, with the effect of diminishing special education provision, thereby also reducing the availability of effective education for young people with SEND.

Nevertheless, our view is that inclusion is an important focus and that inclusive education is appropriate for many children with disabilities—but not *all* of them [4]. This is



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why we, through our Special Issue, argue for the continued implementation of both special and inclusive education or the development of inclusive special education [5]. We are of the opinion that it does not have to be one or the other for *all* students or *all* school children or *all* individuals with disabilities. In fact, in the case of students with SEND, having either *all* or *none* in general education classrooms precludes social justice in education. However, *all* is not problematic for other forms of diversity or for those with SEND in most places and activities other than education.

The 15 articles in the Special Issue present differing perspectives on the topic, examining ideas for implementing effective practice, developing new theoretical views or conducting useful research projects that are relevant to the education of young people with SEND in the education systems that exist in various countries around the world.

The first set of seven articles focus on a range of issues related to the education of learners with special educational needs and disabilities. The first article directly addresses theoretical differences between special education and inclusive education and provides an analysis of key issues contrasting the two paradigms. This is followed by an examination of the use of evidence-based practice and data-based decision-making in the education of learners with SEND. The third article focuses on strategies in the education of young people who present behavioral challenges. This is followed by one article examining the promises and limitations of the use of educational tiers for special and inclusive education and another considering the value of triennial evaluations in providing effective programs for learners with SEND. The sixth article reviews the implications for special education and the inclusion of educating twice-exceptional learners. The final article in this section considers whether inclusive education or special education programs are more likely to result in the inclusion of young people with SEND in their communities post-school.

The second set of eight articles focuses on the provision of special education and inclusive education in six countries in various parts of the world. Three are from Ireland, the others are from Portugal, Estonia, Germany, India, and Australia. The first article from Ireland presents an investigation of an integrated, school-wide, systematic approach to inclusive special education. The second one considers whether Ireland is at a crossroads with respect to its policy for inclusion and the dismantling of its extensive system of special classes. The third one examines whether Universal Design for Learning is gaining momentum in Irish education. The following article, from Portugal, examines teachers' professional development, working conditions, and instructional efficacy with regard to inclusive education. The fifth article evaluates the impact of an in-service training course for school teams on inclusive education in Estonia. The sixth article considers the barriers to inclusive schools that exist in Germany and explains why special education remains necessary there. The seventh article compares access to inclusive education for children with disabilities between metropolitan and rural areas in India. The final article presents a historical review of the development of inclusive education in Western Australia.

It is clear from the vibrant discussion of issues and ideas presented by the articles that there is a strong desire to build on the current practice of both special education and inclusive education. It appears that special education is alive and well, even within the context of calls for its abandonment [3], as well as there being an increasing focus on inclusive education. In terms of the further development of both special education and inclusive education, several articles emphasised the need for improved dissemination and greater implementation of evidence-based practices. Other articles focused on the importance of providing effective support and in-service education for teachers, as well as the usefulness of interventions, such as Universal Design for Learning. The value of regular assessments of children with SEND and tiered intervention systems was discussed, as well as the necessity for evaluations of long-term outcomes of either special education or inclusive education. The importance of recognising both the needs of twice-exceptional children and of implementing effective interventions for those with behavioral challenges was emphasised. The value of understanding the history and context of the development

of special education and inclusive education, identifying barriers to implementation, and of recognising rural/urban differences was also emphasised.

It is clear that special education still has much to offer in ensuring optimum outcomes for young people with SEND. However, the pressure to seriously consider the extreme option of full inclusion, resulting in the extinction of special education, is evident in one of the articles. This is despite the lack of evidence that full inclusion has been successfully implemented in any country, state, or province. In contrast, reality shows that continua of placement options are still the typical approach of education systems for meeting the needs of young people with SEND in most countries.

In conclusion, we want thinking, writing, and talking about educating students with SEND to be clearly included in what has been called the reality-based community [6]. Inclusion in that community does not come easily, and requires careful thought and the restraining of impulses to draw quick and intuitive decisions about what is possible. Moreover, we hope for the advancement of knowledge, understanding, and instructional skills necessary to implement effective inclusive and special education e.g., [7,8]. We want the aspirations of both special and inclusive education to be realized, not neutralized [8]. Neutralization could come in response to the demand of those who may have only good intentions but insist on promulgating the fantasy that general education can be so transformed that special education will become a relic of the past, no longer needed by anyone. This must not be allowed to happen as it would mean the loss of many decades of innovation and development of programs, strategies, and techniques for optimizing the education of learners with SEND. We consider that a much better way forward is to focus on continued development of the combination of and collaboration between special education and general education, to make it as inclusive as possible in the best sense of “inclusion” and “inclusive” by focusing on appropriate instruction for all. We want high-quality instruction, not placement, to be the primary concern of all educators, and we believe such instruction can happen often, but not always, in regular classrooms in neighborhood schools.

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