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Special Issue
Inclusive Education: Canada's Connection to the World

Whereto From Here?
A Discussion Among International Scholars of Inclusive Education

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Abstract

Which ideas are central to inclusive education in Canada, and how do educators and researchers build capacity to provide it? Who or what is still missing, and how can international collaboration help us accomplish our goals in inclusive education? This article reports on a discussion among international scholars of inclusive education as they considered these questions together. These scholars, from Canada, Scotland, Finland, and Germany, considered the lessons they (we) have learned from our history of inclusive education in Canada. They drew on their experience with collaborative research to outline some clear benefits of working together, and learning from each other, to find progressive ways forward in inclusive education.

Between the rising numbers of students accessing special education services (e.g., British Columbia News, 2021; Ministry of Education, 2022) and the sharp increases seen in behavioural issues, self-regulation, and mental-health challenges in students (People for Education, 2023), meeting the needs of all students has perhaps never been harder. And yet, examples of exemplary inclusive education practice are happening every day in classrooms across the country (e.g., Duquette & Parr, 2022; Geist et al., 2020; Mrstik et al., 2020). Despite geographical differences in policy and culture, inclusive educators and researchers of inclusion can learn a great deal from each other when opportunities for dialogue and the sharing of practices and research findings emerge. The central question is always, Which cultures, practices, and structures can be adapted and in what way? As in any field, progress is sustainable when people work together with the same goals and visions, and that begins with having conversations.

In 2022, we released an edited book focused on bringing together international scholars of inclusive education to discuss how inclusion is implemented and translated in the Canadian school system (Christou et al., 2022). The idea was that this book could encourage more international conversations about a topic that affects students globally, using the Canadian context as a platform for these discussions. Chapters from European scholars discussed the structure, culture, and practices of inclusive education in Canada compared to European countries, and Canadian scholars responded reflecting their national research, context, and experiences. As with any rich exchange of ideas, new questions emerged that relate to how our education systems and practices can become more inclusive for all students. With this special issue focused on Canada's connection to the world, we were faced with another opportunity to continue these conversations among distinguished international scholars in the field of inclusive education.

This article represents a curated conversation among inclusive education scholars working in Canada and different countries of Europe (Finland, Germany, and Scotland). In addition to their research experience in inclusive education, these scholars were selected because of their experience engaging in collaborative work on an international level. The work of the selected European researchers has lain in the international comparative field of inclusive education and its implementation and realization in various countries worldwide. The colleagues from Canada were selected because they had a proven track record with regard to the development of inclusive education in Canada. As noted in our book, Canada has been a focus of inclusive education research with its history of multiculturalism and its diversity across regions in how inclusion is practised, making it an ideal context for the focus of this conversation. The Canadian education system has been regarded as a shining example of inclusive education and has therefore also attracted a great deal of interest from researchers in European countries. The goal of the conversation was to discuss further questions that emerged from our edited book to better understand global issues and their development in Canada, and to gain insights into necessary transformative aspects and contexts. For this purpose, we invited experts to an online conversation about these ideas. Four questions guided the conversation:

(1) What are the core ideas that bind the community of inclusive educators?

(2) How do we build our capacity to provide inclusive education?

(3) Who or what is still left out of inclusive education, and what is our social responsibility as leaders in the field?

(4) What are the benefits of international collaborative work?

Before beginning the conversation, the scholars were asked for a brief introduction:

Lani Florian recently retired as a professor from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, where she is still professionally active. Before coming to the academy, she was a teacher of children with special educational needs in the United States, which eventually brought her to the United Kingdom, where she lives today as a U.S.–UK dual national.

Markku Jahnukainen is a professor of special education at the University of Helsinki in Finland. Markku spent three years at the University of Alberta from 2007 to 2010 and explains that he has specialized in comparative research, which has included both policy and empirical work.

Andreas Köpfer is a professor of research in inclusive education at the University of Education in Freiburg in Germany. He identifies "spatial theory, social theories regarding inclusive education and also international comparative perspectives" as his research interests.

Jeffrey MacCormack is an associate professor of inclusive education and inclusion at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada. MacCormack's research is heavily informed by a decade of experience as a classroom teacher, some of which was spent in a classroom for non-speaking children on the autism spectrum; his most recent research "[focuses] on school experiences of students with multiple and profound disabilities."

Jess Whitley is a professor of inclusive education at the University of Ottawa in Ontario, Canada, where she is currently serving as vice-dean of research. She centres her research interests "at the intersection of education and mental health."

In what follows, we highlight insights from these scholars regarding our four questions of focus, beginning with the glue that binds the community of inclusive educators in Canada and elsewhere. Within this structure, text that is not attributed to a particular scholar can be attributed to Matheson, Merz-Atalik, Christou, and Kruschel.

What Are the Core Ideas That Bind the Community of Inclusive Educators?

Köpfer identified the importance of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) to the thinking about inclusive education of teachers in practice. He noted that "teachers [in Canada] referred to it in a way that I found quite progressive." He had the impression that the development of the inclusive education system was built on this charter and referred to it as a "starting point" for

> the development of support structures which took place, focused on this anti-discrimination law, which was in a way a driving point to develop some sort of community-based approach on inclusive education and is in a way quite different to what is taking place in some other countries. Because inclusive education there has been translated as an individualized or personalized approach, inclusive education as an individualization of special needs. And I think this reference—I mean that was my interpretation—was such a strong glue as you said, for the schools and to build some sort of school culture, of inclusive culture to develop

> support structures, which were individualizing. In a way it supported a community and collaborative approach.

Jahnukainen pointed out that the vision behind the Charter was reconstructed quite differently in the individual provinces. He recognized the Charter as being

> kind of pan-Canadian, so it is something that basically is in every province, you need to follow. But what is kind of interesting of course in Canada is that it's a huge country, but every province has very different kinds of systems. They have autonomy and independence because they have their own ministries and so on. They have developed very different kinds of systems.… There is not that one kind of Canadian model that would be followed in every province. That is sometimes a little bit misleading.

Despite the differences in the application of the Charter across Canada, Florian made the point that the core ideas within the Charter seem to be universal values and leading visions for inclusive education, also in other countries:

> I think this idea, that's enshrined in that Canadian charter, is also universal, based on universal human values. It's an argument I've been trying to really develop: that our policies and processes may look different on the surface, but when you drill down, they're underpinned by common values and that's the glue that holds us together. Whether those things are enshrined in policy or not, they are enacted at a human level in every context to a greater or lesser extent. So, in Finland, there may not be the policy, so it may be harder to see and discern the kind of practice that we would all recognize as inclusive: practice that respects the dignity of the person, that the person has a voice, that the person feels they belong, and so on. But there's something, for me, that's important about not being distracted by what I would consider to be a kind of superficial difference, because you can drill down and find commonalities.

MacCormack acknowledged, on the one hand, the importance of the Charter but, on the other, he recognized the challenges that can come with implementing the vision behind it: inclusive education practice for all. He stated that, for him,

> the question of inclusion really comes down to the pragmatics versus the philosophical underpinnings. The inclusive movement in Canada right now seems to be hunched around the moral imperative of it, the human rights part of it. Asking *why* would you put a student out of the regular classroom? That message, of course, comes from legislation in Canada and even major international documents like the Salamanca Statement.[1] But the issue of inclusion of students with disabilities goes beyond the moral imperative to include everyone. As I mentioned earlier on in the process, as a teacher of non-speaking students I had to build a curriculum from the ground up. Because most provincial curricula cover grades from K to 12 [kindergarten to Grade 12], there's nothing that really comes before kindergarten in terms of the education curriculum. I was pulling together patchwork ideas about what kids need in the community and trying to get them into their classroom spaces. I spent all my days and many of my nights wondering about how I can get my students into—let's say—their grade 3 gym class and to be working and functioning well with those students and have those social interactions that they need. But it certainly took, you know, a lot of thought in terms of what and how it might happen. And when I think about the challenges of supporting students who are non-speaking with multiple and profound disabilities, I do think about what we teach here

[1] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization & Spain Ministry of Education and Science (1994).

> in the faculty of education. You know, we have one or possibly two courses that cover special education or inclusive education approaches, but that is not enough. With that amount of time, what are we talking about? Really, what we're talking about is how everyone has a right to be in the classroom. We spend possibly—it's certainly true in my school—less time talking about how that works instead of the fact that it must happen.

According to MacCormack, the question of how to implement and develop successful inclusive education practices in the schools for each child seems sometimes to be obscured by the pressure to implement it. Whitley noted another huge discrepancy between the ideas of full inclusion (vision) and the concepts favoured in practice, talking to different stakeholders in Nova Scotia, Canada. She described forms of incremental change (step by step) starting from the traditionally existing structures and practices in the schools and slowly adapting to the new paradigm of inclusion. This is in contrast to fundamental transformative processes toward an inclusive education system that would be able to be inclusive. She also discussed the issue of a lack of school choice for students and parents (especially in some areas with a single high school):

> This vision for all students in their local neighborhood classroom, that is not the vision that I hear coming through very often when I ask people what their vision is for policy and for moving forward. Many examples and instances pointed out and shown to me where some of the environments that are considered by many to be the most inclusive—either by the parent, either by the student or by staff—are ones that are away from the regular classroom. So, for example, one of the most amazing examples that pop out to me are some of the alternative high schools that are starting up in these rural areas. And in some of these rural areas, there is just the one high school. So, you don't have a choice if things aren't going super well for you, if your needs aren't being met, there is no alternative for you. So many of these kids just leave the system and just kind of disappear in these areas. These alternative high schools are small. Students can follow their own passion. They can get credits through multiple pathways and to me, some of those settings in context which are considered alternative, are to me kind of the ultimate vision for what would allow for example a high school context to be inclusive. What this evaluation has brought to light is that we continue to struggle to see systems in different ways. And continue to try to just kind of bang our heads against the wall to just keep environments looking the same as they've looked in some of these schools for 50, 60 years. And then to try to fit inclusion into these contexts and systems where in fact it's some of these out of the box thinking kinds of contexts which are outside of the normal outside of the regular school system where we're seeing practices that are perceived and felt as inclusive.

Jahnukainen underlined the notion of the tremendous power of parents, especially of parents' associations, saying that he thinks that "they have had a lot to do with the inclusive movement in Canada like in other places. Basically, parents who have wanted to get better services for their children."

How Do We Build Our Capacity to Provide Inclusive Education?

Whitley highlighted the power of working together to build capacity and get new ideas of how to change traditional practices:

> It's difficult to imagine how things could be done differently when you just have your blinders on and you're for example trying to run a huge high school as are many of the principals we spoke to. They simply could not imagine how, for example, a high school

> structure could exist in any other way. And so those kinds of collaborations and possibilities of spending time with folks within their region, but also more broadly to be able to have some of those ideas develop are key.

Florian shared this thinking about the importance of collaborating with others. She referred to a concept of a more holistic approach as a fundamental element for effective collaboration and for building capacity and learning communities:

> What I'm about to say came out of the work that I did with Martyn Rouse[2] and other colleagues on *teacher education for inclusion* which involved drawing on Lee Shulman's work [2007] in the field of teacher education. He talked about the apprenticeships of the head, the hand and the heart. In other words: the knowledge, skills and beliefs that one must hold. Martyn developed an argument around these apprenticeships as being reciprocal in that each influences the other and we should try to think about those things in terms of their interactions with each other as capacity building. For example, you may be in an environment where someone's got knowledge but no skill, such as an inclusion advocate without knowledge of teaching practice, and you may have teachers who know, don't know, never even heard the word inclusion, but their practice is phenomenal. And when you put these people together there's great capacity to enhance the collaborative work that goes on in the school.

Jahnukainen agreed that collaboration is a basic approach to developing inclusion, but the basic attitudes of people sometimes must be developed against dominant cultures in the teaching profession. He emphasized that co-teaching holds great promise for capacity building:

> Of course, you need to learn to cooperate with others, because in Finnish society, this position is still quite autonomous and it is not very typical to work with others. But those who have started to do that, they have had good experiences. Nowadays, because we have the university training schools, our students have the possibility to have that kind of training during their studies to work with other teachers and develop different programs in relation.

Therefore, he stressed that teacher education should include cooperation and co-teaching skills. MacCormack noted the peculiarity of the current lack of collaboration between various training programs for the different professions in an inclusive education classroom:

> It's bizarre to me that the Faculty of Education and the Educational Assistant [EA] program at the college aren't totally working together. Because right now we are very siloed: EAs are receiving their marching orders and going into schools, teachers are receiving their marching orders and going into schools and those visions of what the classroom looks like may be completely misaligned. But either way, EAs continue to have a massive role; in Britain between the years of 2000 and 2016, the rate of EAs tripled. I think that's consistent in Canada as well. There's EAs in classrooms and really the only limit is funding. We don't want to acknowledge that EAs, as they're deployed now, are an imperfect solution to the complex problem.

Instead of bringing continuously more additional assistive staff resources into the schools, there should be more attention to the training of this staff into their professional

[2] Martyn Rouse (1945–2021) worked as a professor of educational and social inclusion at the University of Aberdeen. He was a pioneer in international support of the development of inclusive education systems (e.g., in Central Asia, Europe, and the Balkans). His research has influenced the work of many international scholars.

roles and competences for inclusive education. Not unlike the importance he attached to co-teaching, Jahnukainen expressed his appreciation for shared leadership and considered administrative positions to be especially important for inclusive education:

> It was very often that there was the principal but there were two, maybe even three, assistant principals. And they all had their own tasks and duties and very often one of the assistant principals, their responsibility was related to the organization of and consultation for anything related to inclusive and special education. And that was really something because somebody had the responsibility to lead that area and to consult teachers and so on. Many of the students in our special ed master's course were aiming for that kind of position as assistant principals who are leading inclusive events and special education.

Köpfer discussed the tremendous value of the support that is provided to teachers in Canada, unlike in other parts of the world:

> In Germany there is no discourse about how teachers can be supported within schools to deal with heterogenous classrooms. I found it quite interesting, this idea of developing support roles. I mean, methods and resource teacher, teacher assistant, although in practice they're quite ambivalent of course. It is still problematic in a way those roles, but this idea of supporting teachers and letting them feel that dealing with or teaching a heterogenous classroom is tricky, but you can rely on the help of others and you can look up for the help etc. It's not like once you fail, the child must be transferred to the special teacher and to a special school etc. But supporting teachers, this theme has not been sufficiently developed in the international inclusive education discourse. Lani [Florian] and Martyn [Rouse] wrote a paper focused on teacher support, but it's not that widely common, I think.

He also mentioned the value of considering what can be learned from various international systems rather than focusing on only one model for inclusive education:

> It is, in a way, tricky or difficult to highlight one system and always look for the best inclusive space, the best practice model, etc. From the perspective of a scholar who does comparative education, comparative perspectives are good to see through systems because you can compare them. Coming from the German system, which is highly specialized, looking into the New Brunswick system which is rather generalizing or has a model of generalized and community approach, it was such a huge, huge difference. I think it's important not to do too much highlighting of one system [generalized or specialized]. Rather ask how these two aspects can be combined, having some sort of specialization, but also having a generalized model. What is most important is to start with a generalization, to have the students in place, to have them in the schools. What's happening in Germany now is, it's this morally loaded question of "Can this student be part of this?" or "Can they be in there?" It's always talking about placing students. It's always this perspective of a student being outside. What was striking for me in New Brunswick was that it's taken for granted that the students are in a mainstream school. I think that's the starting point to look for specialization and it doesn't have to be a taboo to be specialized or to find special spaces within the schools. I would say it's important to combine those two perspectives and not like looking for that one perfect model here.

Instead of discussing whether generalized or specialized programs should be given preference (as two independent alternatives), Köpfer has made a case for combining the two while enrolling all children in a common inclusive school. "Special" should only take place in the community of the mainstreaming school. The morally loaded discourse,

according to him, has been taking too much space and energy. Florian agreed about the importance of not getting stuck on trying to force a singular model:

> I think looking at multi-dimensional models—that take account of those different factors—is important for professional development at all levels. My experience in many places, whether that's within a school, across schools, across counties, countries, states, nations, is that individuals are going to be in different places. And if we wait for everybody to get on the same page, we never go anywhere. You must start somewhere, you must start with what you have and develop your practice from there, knowing you must accept the fact that it will be imperfect and there will be bumps in the road and things will go wrong sometimes.

Whitley emphasized the need for constantly and comprehensively integrating the question of staffing in education systems:

> If inclusive education is something that is truly valued, it needs to appear at the point of hiring. It needs to appear at the point of teacher evaluation, of leadership evaluation. It needs to be clear that that's an essential piece of what we are doing. So that pressure needs to be there but then all those opportunities for capacity building—including the lovely coaching model that New Brunswick has—is something that we have seen people point to as powerful. Really having that someone with expertise that's at your shoulder for some period, in co-teaching, some opportunity where you can be part of practice with them. Those are some examples of what we've seen to be as powerful. And I'll just list one last one. Part of the inclusive policies that we're seeing here in Canada: some of them are shifting and morphing a bit away from the special needs focus. Thinking about those equity-deserving groups, part of what we're recognizing is that these practices and this focus on inclusive education can only happen if we have diverse voices and experiences at the table. Otherwise, we just perpetuate the same ways that we've always done things. That's a capacity building piece that I'm finding essential: just to have that range of voices and perspectives around any decision-making table.

Diverse voices must be actively involved in the reform, but it must be ensured that there are actors in all bodies and decision-making processes who competently contribute and pursue the goal of inclusive education. MacCormack recalled a seminal study focused on education support staff in Britain to point out that so much can depend on how resources are used:

> I love talking about educational assistants or teaching aides, or whatever they're called in the jurisdiction where you are because, as I'm sure everyone here already knows, a little over 10 years ago now, there was a major study of the role of support staff in Britain called the DISS study or the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff project.[3] And they used a rich and robust data collection method. They had hundreds of student observations, over a hundred observations of educational assistants in their classroom space, over 17,000 surveys, and almost 500 interviews. And so, they matched students based on their ability and their intelligence and their adaptive skills and compared the academic success of students with disabilities who have access to a teaching aide versus those who do not have access to a teaching aide. And the net contribution of teaching aides to academic growth of students was negative. Which was shocking to the authors of that study. The findings certainly seem counterintuitive. I know that I've worked with EAs over my life as well and they do incredible work and you can see them doing some of the most difficult, most complex, most primarily

[3] Blatchford et al. (2009).

> locked-in-with-the-student work and they're often doing it for a little more than they would make at like a fast-food restaurant. That's certainly how it works in Canada. And EAs continue to be a cost-effective answer to a complex challenge: the challenge of how you provide quality education for students in a classroom where maybe most of the students are at a different academic or intellectual level. And so, as it turns out, kids with disabilities are more often primarily taught by their EAs. So those students who probably require more face-on-face time with their teacher end up getting the least of it. Students were 9 times more likely to have sustained interactions with their EAs than their teachers, but EAs don't have the kind of education that comes with even a basic Bachelor of Education. They will, at least according to Blatchford and colleagues in the study I'm talking about, they said that EAs tend to ask a closed question rather than open question. So rather than walking the student through the thinking, they'll ask, "Is the answer 5 or the answer 3? 3, good guess. No, the answer is 5. Put down 5."

The article MacCormack referred to highlighted many issues for staff development, for example, the lack of training for the assistants and the need to qualify their professional activities in the classroom. Reflecting on MacCormack´s point about the value of considering empirical research on inclusive education settings, Florian responded,

> I think that was a brilliant encapsulation of a very complex problem and the lesson in it for me is that there is so much that we can glean from this kind of thoughtful analysis of these complex problems. And, from my perspective, the shortest way that I can think of to say, to make my point here is that "It's not what you do, it's how you do it." You know, like the TA [teacher assistant] problem is not that they're TAs, it's that there are some that have worked brilliantly in ways that foster belonging and inclusion and then there are others that just become the barrier to the child forming social networks. For where I am, the question is, How are we doing this work? Can we do the micro-level analyses of the practices that people engage with so that we can begin to make distinctions between types of practice is an important question for future research.

With this insightful statement by Florian, the conversation shifted to the identification of current gaps within inclusive education, and what scholars should be focusing on in research.

Who or What Is Still Left Out of Inclusive Education, and What Is Our Social Responsibility as Leaders in the Field?

Florian identified the need to focus more on understanding the roles of teachers within various educational structures and to critically reflect on the historical context of inclusion:

> I think that one of the things that was profound for me was shifting from working in inclusive education as a special educator to focussing on how to support classroom teachers in ways that aligned with their professional preparation and identity. It wasn't until Martyn [Rouse] and I moved to Scotland to work on reforming initial teacher education for mainstream classroom teachers that I realized that we had never put foot in that literature. I did not have command of the literature. There actually was not much literature to draw on anyway other than what we didn't know about how mainstream classroom teachers were prepared. I realized that a lot of special educators go into the work thinking that they need to scale up special education practices. When one of the things I learned is that we need to understand the existing practices more deeply so that we can function as supports and help build capacity of mainstream classroom teachers to do the work that we're all claiming is their moral

> responsibility to do. I do not think special educators have all the answers, despite making important contributions to learning theory and pedagogy. Even though many of us started there and we moved into this broader world of inclusion focussing on vulnerable groups and who's excluded and so on. But then the question remains: How can we ensure good outcomes for every child? I don't know that we look outside of our own narrow silos of professional knowledge enough. Additionally, I don't think that we have learned from the history of inclusion. I don't even think we've started to ask the questions. There's so much for us to learn from what's worked, what hasn't worked. All the kinds of things we've been talking about are wide open for scholarship.

MacCormack recognized a specific population of students that he felt had been largely absent from our conversations and work on inclusive education:

> I was thinking of non-speaking students in terms of where their voice is in how schools are wrapped around their needs and their wants. And you know, I've certainly seen excellent education of students with multiple and profound disabilities. I have seen students who are non-speaking learn to identify ingredients for a meal, go and shop with a guide, make purchases, return with it, make it on their own, and have lunch. Making lunch may not seem like a lot, but in that kid's life that was a massive success. But I've also seen non-speaking students languishing in the back of their grade 8 math class doing colouring pages, under the banner of inclusive education. And, you know, so much of the debate around inclusion is about location. But of course, as we've all acknowledged in our own ways, location is only the first of many, many, components that goes into healthy inclusion. I just wanted to read a provocative line from the book by Imray and Colley (2017) called *Inclusion is Dead: Long Live Inclusion*. It's about how students with multiple and profound disabilities have been poorly supported through the inclusion system. And while I don't necessarily agree that this statement captures all the nuance of this argument, it's a line that I would be willing to use as a catalyst for conversation in one of my classes. They wrote, "Inclusion has become a recurring trope of academic writing on education. It is trotted out as an external and unarguable truth, but it is neither. It doesn't work and it never has worked. Inclusion is dead." And that's the *first* paragraph in their book. But for those students with multiple and profound disabilities, the efforts that are fueled by moral imperative of inclusion may ultimately mean that there's a generation of non-speaking students who are stuck in their classes, a stranger among their friends because they have no connection point to understand the material being taught.

We can understand this as a reminder that self-advocates and their voices should strongly be involved in the political and scientific discourse around inclusive education practice (for example, through participatory research). In a similar vein, Whitley pointed out that much of the research on parent or guardian perspectives has come from a specific group:

> Some of the voices that we see as being regularly excluded from the research that we do, which is often with parents, are really the voices of anyone who is not a white middle-class parent or a white middle-class mother. They're so overrepresented in all our data. And when we did purposeful, kind of efforts to interview, for example, members of African Nova Scotian communities over the past couple of years, their response to us was "When we hear inclusive education, we don't think it has anything to do with us. Our kids have to splinter themselves into either taking on this pathway of—and this is referenced [in] one of the articles as well, right—this reference of [B]lack excellence and being empowered and heading down this pathway of Afrocentric education or we need to align ourselves with the inclusive

> education folks who are about getting more EA time and more supports and services in the classrooms and more time for reading support" and so feeling like they have to choose between communities. And so, our research often really presents one of those voices and often just totally misses the other. We always put that in the limitations, but it's just, it's just a huge piece for us that we're really grappling with in our research right now.

We can understand this as an argument for a stronger whole-community approach in inclusive education research. Even if we are focusing on a particular group or need, it is important to consider a wider frame of inclusion. Florian built on this point, noting the irony in Whitley's comment:

> People think of inclusive education as something that is not about them. It's either it's this or that. It seems, as somebody said earlier, siloed—we're siloed—and that's the irony. This is something that's supposed to break down barriers and it's just another silo sometimes. And sometimes I wonder to what extent they're reproduced by our methodologies. So, there is a real issue methodologically for the field as well.

Kerstin Merz-Atalik (one of the moderators) considered that often research foci are narrowed by the professional positioning of scholars (e.g., students with learning disabilities), and research therefore only works on selected diversity dimensions. She emphasized that particular groups have no voice in society or in research (due to a lack of specialized disciplines):

> Sometimes as researchers we are focusing on the discourse that we are following in our scientific world, and we forget the discourses that are influencing the people who are working in the school system.… There's a huge group [e.g., socio-economically disadvantaged families] that is not involved at all in our society at least.

With this said, the ideas in the conversation moved to the social responsibility as leaders in the field. Köpfer noted the progress in the shift to include more voices in research, for example, different stakeholders, self-advocates, and different professions acting in inclusive education:

> What I want to emphasize is that in an optimistic way, regarding research, there are new perspectives being brought in, especially like participatory research. I mean, I feel that in the discourse there's now the possibility to integrate or to include other voices and that those voices are being heard more. I don't think they're heard enough, but they're heard more. There is some sort of paradigm shift in inclusive education research, which I'm quite optimistic about, this change from a culture of selecting and separating rather moving to a culture of supporting. Of course, you can say the roles of EAs or teachers, etc. must be modified or adapted, but at least you're talking about supporting students and not selecting … students. That is an important shift which took place. But still, it's the responsibility, especially for scholars not to try and explain students but rather try to understand practices which take place and try to listen to the voices of the different stakeholders. Also to the voices of for example teacher or educational assistants and asking them how do they do their work what they are striving for and there's research that shows that they're striving of course for autonomy because the collaboration with the teachers are difficult and so I found going back to New Brunswick, this model quite interesting to say, well, this role should be a teacher supporting role, a teacher assistant role and not being too close to the student.

Jahnukainen wanted to encourage scholars to consider their responsibility to advocate in the face of actual policy change that can be counter to what our research is suggesting:

> In Finland, we have an interesting situation because we have a new very right-wing government. And what is going on in education policy is that they want to bring back law and order and bring back special classes, special schools, and things like that. And something with having that it's our responsibility as a researcher and that is something we have tried to do, … to try to explain what is going on, what we know about inclusion, what inclusion is, and what inclusion is not. That is something that is going on all the time here. That is not always very nice, nowadays, it can be quite harsh, the discussion, but that is something that we are trying to do here. So, trying to make some sense to that senseless discussion. And at the same time of course as a researcher, I know that we need more research and good quality research. It is quite interesting that we don't have a lot of that kind of research where we can report a lot of the outcomes. And that is something that we are trying to do. So, try to do that as well as we can and hopefully bring people the kind of results that are trustworthy, and we can also convince the politicians about what we know about different kinds of solutions.

He saw the responsibility of scholars as the production of robust, research-based arguments (knowledge) for the education policy debate and its introduction of this knowledge into the public discourse (transfer). The following section focuses on how working together across borders leads to efforts to support more inclusive education for students.

What Are the Benefits of International Collaborative Work?

MacCormack opened the conversation by identifying how international collaborative work can teach us lessons about how our national systems operate:

> One of the international studies that I've been working on for the last couple of years is a pretty simple comparative study of attitudes about autism here in Western Canada and with a similarly sized sample of people from Hong Kong. And it's interesting to look at how special education or inclusive education or the idea of supporting all students differs in countries with different values or perspectives. You might have a country with a collectivist perspective where, you know, sometimes the idea is that students with special education needs may be seen as a drain on the family, and there's a lot of stigma imbued in that, and so families are negotiating with the school to take on and share some of that responsibility. Versus here in Western Canada, there's a real sense that institutions are primarily responsible and many parents have the sense that they drop their kids off at school and they kind of want it taken care of and handled. But, you know, something that's interesting to me are the components of teaching practice that are not teachable in a Bachelor of Education program, just because they're primarily unteachable concepts. Things like executive function and working memory. For example, this relates to how capable a teacher is to respond appropriately when receiving some anger and vitriol from a student over some grade they received or some ruling they made. How capable is that teacher to not match that emotional space, but to look at it from a dispassionate perspective from an arm's distance and being able to deal with the core issue without getting their own back up in terms of that interaction. These are not just teacher skills. They are people skills that people practice in their everyday life. So part of the advice that I give to my student teachers is that some people are able to hear someone having an emotional moment and focus on the core issue and help solve problems or you know, help the student in the way that they need it. But some people will automatically mirror that emotional space and that can be a major obstacle to being able to support students pragmatically in the moment. It's certainly the best place to start to think about how we train teachers and what we tell them when we have access to them. But I think that we also need to put some thought into who's walking in the front door. Like, what kinds of things are we

> looking for? We still primarily recruit teachers based on their Grade Point Average. And Grade Point Average is mutually exclusive from their personality skills and their experience and their attitudes. In terms of building best practices, I would like to have a more comprehensive and robust mechanism by which to accept people into an education program.

Florian also noted the value of this international cooperation but also emphasized that we need to avoid limiting ourselves to large-scale initiatives at the expense of smaller projects that can provide similar value:

> We must bear in mind that there is really very little money for big projects. Much of what we are talking about is being done in small networks like this one and it makes me wonder if we must cut ourselves a little bit of slack about why we're not doing the broader more complex projects. Such work requires an investment in sustained research programmes to help pull all this together. That would be amazing. But I also think we've got good smaller projects. Kerstin, I think I met you through a project you did with Justin [Powell]. That's an example of a powerful multimedia, multi-country project. All the materials can be used in teacher education, and it is a good example of the kinds of projects that have been done over many years. We need a meta-analysis of that work. And that's an example of something we could really learn from because we would be looking at projects, where all the problems we've been talking about today—poverty, barriers, mainstream education systems that sort children at the age of 6,[4] all those kinds of things. And yet, in every single one of those countries, projects were able to identify practices that all of us would recognize as practice.

Merz-Atalik shared how eye-opening the experience can be for stakeholders:

> I think the impact of this comparative and cooperative work internationally for us as scholars at the university is obvious. The global scientific community that we are talking about today wasn't like this 20 years ago at the university. I didn't get to read the publications of Lani [Florian] or of anyone else. I was just in my German perspective. For us as scholars it's obvious. What I've learned from two former EU [European Union] projects that I was coordinating or working with is that we must bring the multiple agents and actors who are involved in the change management of the systems into opportunities to examine other countries, to see other perspectives, to see other systems. Just recently we have this project on governance of inclusive education,[5] and we are working with four different school administration regions in Europe (i.e., Austria, Spain, Italy and Germany). The first utterance of a person working in the school authority was "I have never had the opportunity to see how it is different in other countries," because school administration is very often not involved into research and often not involved in international cooperative projects. There is nationally no funding for them to do this and there are a lot of other actors that we should get into our international comparative research like self-advocates. Bringing self-advocates together from different countries is essential, as is bringing parents together from different countries, or teachers, as we did it in the Teacher Education for Inclusion project.[6] I think this is something we must … advance: not only working on the theoretical level, bridging the gap between the theory and practice in this comparative work. This is something I would really think that could be a next step in our work.

[4] In 14 of the German federal states, students are selected into three to four school types after Grade 4.
[5] Governance Inclusive Education (www.govined.eu).
[6] A project of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. See https://www.european-agency.org/activities/te4i

Finally, Köpfer discussed the nuances of understanding the connection between practice and the broader systems within a country, noting that understanding these connections is vital to broader change in inclusive education:

> I really like Stuart Hall's theory of articulation [1985] because he says that for a phenomenon to become popular it needs to connect with something; it needs to connect with the structures and cultures of, for example, a country or a culture which is represented in the country. I think the idea of inclusive education connects with the cultures and political social conditions of each country. And if you're only inside your own bubble and your own country, for example in Germany, the idea of inclusive education as being so closely connected with placing students with special educational needs in general schools and in other countries there are some other connections, some other discourses. For example, when we flew to Iceland and then you saw that in a way, inclusive education is being connected with ideas of democratic school development. And so, there are some articulations in other countries which aren't in your country so it's really important to look outside the box and to have international and interregional collaborations. But I think the challenge in a way also for researchers is how to make the research results powerful to change like the whole system because it's so easy then for the others to say "Well, that's the Canadian system, that's different, that's a different country," etc. The German system works differently. I think there must be more steps to make comparative research results powerful and effective—to transform educational systems of specific countries. That's a huge challenge. I don't have solutions for that, but I think that should be the steps to go.

This concluding comment by Köpfer noted optimism for potential collaborations locally, nationally, and internationally:

Concluding Remarks

The conversation has shown that there are factors that can be recognized as supportive for the development of inclusive education internationally. We, as scholars, also face common challenges and problems that vary in their manifestation from country to country. For example, the significance of the normative and ethical discourse in the wake of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations General Assembly, 2006), teacher shortages, or the need to consider all diversity dimensions in inclusive education research. International dialogue and cooperation can ensure that research findings are shared and perceived beyond national or linguistic borders. This exchange can contribute to a stronger reflection on contextual factors and systemic frameworks related to inclusive education in terms of their relevance for the observed aspects of practice. We can consider the different policies, transformative strategies, models, and processes in the implementation of inclusive education reforms internationally, all of which should receive greater attention from comparative educational research. For example, even if there are clear regulations like the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982), no education system in the provinces and territories has adapted the concept in the same way as another. Rather, a recontextualization of normative specifications has taken place, and the regulations have often competed with historically grown cultures or structures that are deeply embedded in the socio-cultural consciousness. This was an eye-opener, as German scholars and stakeholders often advocate for stronger state-wide regulations, believing that such regulations could have a stronger impact on progress toward inclusion.

Anyone who has attended an academic conference understands the pressures and constraints that come with scheduled research presentations: though these sessions offer tremendous value to attendees in hearing about recent and relevant research within a particular field, the rich exchange of ideas between presenters and attendees often comes at the expense of other presenters in the session or does not occur at all. These exchanges, including the conceptualization of new partnerships and projects, often come in the minutes *between* sessions, in busy hallways or classrooms as conference attendees file in and out. This special issue highlights the immense value of sharing ideas and comparing what we do to ensure that all students can access education—a privilege that allows us to engage with the global curriculum together.

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