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**Enhancing inclusion in the education system through school and lesson development. The concept of inclusive inquiry**

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# Enhancing inclusion in the education system through school and lesson development: the concept of Inclusive Inquiry

**Zusammenfassung**

Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Herausforderungen und Widersprüche bei der Umsetzung inklusiver Bildung in Österreich, insbesondere in Bezug auf Schülerinnen und Schüler mit sonderpädagogischem Förderbedarf (SPF). Trotz klarer gesetzlicher Regelungen bestehen erhebliche Unterschiede zwischen den Bundesländern in der Umsetzung und Ressourcenzuweisung. Das Konzept der „Inclusive Inquiry" wird als Modell inklusiver Bildung vorgeschlagen, um diese Diskrepanzen zu überwinden. Es handelt sich um einen kollaborativen Aktionsforschungsansatz, bei dem Lehrpersonen und Lernende gemeinsam Unterricht planen, durchführen und analysieren, um ihn inklusiver zu gestalten. Erfahrungen in Österreich zeigen, dass diese Methode die Zusammenarbeit von Lehrpersonen, das Engagement der Schülerinnen und Schüler und inklusive Lernumgebungen fördert, obwohl sie auch zeitaufwendig ist. Der partizipative Ansatz zur inklusiven Bildung bezieht alle Beteiligten, einschließlich der Lernenden, in die Unterrichtsentwicklung ein und nutzt bestehende Kenntnisse innerhalb der Schulen.

**Abstract**

This text examines the challenges and contradictions in implementing inclusive education in Austria, particularly for students with special educational needs (SEN). Despite clear legal regulations, there are significant differences between federal states in the implementation of inclusive education and resource allocation. The concept of "Inclusive Inquiry" is proposed as a model to overcome these discrepancies. It is a collaborative action research approach where teachers and students jointly plan, conduct, and analyze lessons to make them more inclusive. Experiences in Austria have shown that this method promotes teacher collaboration, student engagement, and inclusive learning environments, although it is also time-consuming. The text advocates for a participatory approach to inclusive education that involves all stakeholders, including students, in lesson development and leverages existing knowledge within schools.

## Advance Organizer

**Zielsetzung und Überblick:**

Der Artikel „Förderung der Inklusion im Bildungssystem durch Schul- und Unterrichtsentwicklung: Das „Inclusive Inquiry" Konzept von Barbara Gasteiger-Klicpera und Lisa Paleczek stellt eine Methode vor, wie die inklusive Bildung in Österreich vorangebracht werden kann. Trotz bestehender gesetzlicher Vorschriften gibt es erhebliche Unterschiede in der Umsetzung inklusiver Bildung in den verschiedenen Bundesländern. Die Autorinnen schlagen einen systemischen Ansatz zur Inklusion vor, der sich darauf konzentriert, Barrieren abzubauen, anstatt Schülerinnen und Schüler zu kategorisieren. Sie stellen das „Inclusive Inquiry" Modell vor, bei dem Lehrkräfte und Lernende in einem gemeinsamen Aktionsforschungsprozess zusammenarbeiten, um Unterricht inklusiver zu gestalten.

**Schlüsselthemen und Konzepte:**

1. Aktuelle Herausforderungen in der inklusiven Bildung:
   a) Es bestehen erhebliche Unterschiede bei der Diagnose und Integrationsquote von Schülerinnen und Schülern mit sonderpädagogischem Förderbedarf (SPF) in den österreichischen Bundesländern.
   b) Diese Diskrepanzen verdeutlichen die Notwendigkeit eines systemischen Ansatzes, der sich auf den Abbau von Barrieren konzentriert, anstatt Behinderungen zu definieren.
2. Klarheit der Zielsetzung und evidenzbasierte Ansätze:
   a) Mel Ainscows zwei wesentliche Mechanismen für die inklusive Schulentwicklung werden betont: Klarheit der Zielsetzung und die bedeutsame Rolle von Evidenz.
   b) Alle Beteiligten müssen sich auf Leitprinzipien für Inklusion und Chancengleichheit einigen, diese sollen die Bildungspolitik und -praxis prägen.
3. Das „Inclusive Inquiry" Modell:
   a) Inclusive Inquiry ist ein kollaboratives Aktionsforschungsmodell, bei dem Lehrkräfte und Lernende als Mitforschende agieren.
   b) Der Prozess umfasst die Planung, Durchführung und Analyse von Unterricht, um ihn inklusiver zu gestalten, wobei das Feedback der Schülerinnen und Schüler zur Anpassung der Unterrichtsmethoden genutzt wird.
4. Erfahrungen und Vorteile von Inclusive Inquiry:
   a) Das Modell wurde in verschiedenen Ländern umgesetzt und zeigt positive Ergebnisse, wie eine verbesserte Zusammenarbeit der Lehrkräfte und gesteigerte Partizipation der Schülerinnen und Schüler.

b) Herausforderungen stellen zeitaufwändige Prozesse und der Bedarf an Unterstützung durch die Schulverwaltung dar.

5. Praktische Umsetzung:

a) Lehrkräfte bilden gemeinsam mit Schülerinnen und Schülern Teams, um Unterrichtsstunden gemeinsam zu planen, zu beobachten und zu verbessern, wobei das Feedback aller am Prozess beteiligten Personen einbezogen wird.

b) Die Methode fördert einen dynamischen, kooperativen Unterricht, der sich an den Bedürfnissen aller Schülerinnen und Schüler orientiert und darauf abzielt, inklusiv und zugänglich zu sein.

**Verbindung zu Vorwissen und Kontext:**

Das Konzept des Inclusive Inquiry baut auf bestehendem Wissen über inklusive Bildung, Aktionsforschung und kollaborative Unterrichtspraktiken auf. Pädagoginnen und Pädagogen sowie und Entscheidungstragende, die mit diesen Bereichen vertraut sind, können ihr Verständnis dafür vertiefen, wie systemische Ansätze und die Einbeziehung der Lernenden inklusive Praktiken verbessern können. Durch die Untersuchung der praktischen Umsetzung und der Vorteile des Inclusive Inquiry können die Lesenden Strategien erlernen, um inklusive Lernumgebungen zu schaffen, die den vielfältigen Bedürfnissen aller Schülerinnen und Schüler gerecht werden. Das Modell unterstreicht die Bedeutung evidenzbasierter Ansätze und die Einbindung aller Beteiligten, einschließlich der Lernenden, in die Entwicklung inklusiver Bildung.

## Central contradictions in the current situation of inclusive education

As in many other countries, students with special educational needs (SEN) in Austria, encounter large differences regarding their possibility for inclusive education, depending on the federal state they are living in. Although the Ministry of Education provided clear legal regulations and guidelines, the policies of assignment of SEN to certain students and the used classification criteria for the allocation of SEN differ largely between the federal states as well as the allocation practices (Gasteiger-Klicpera et al., 2023). In the school year 2021/22, the percentage of students diagnosed with SEN in the federal states varied from 2.8% in compulsory general education schools in Tyrol up to 6.9% in Salzburg (Statistik Austria, 2023). Differences between the federal states concerning the integration rates are similarly problematic: In the school year 2019/20, the integration rate of students with SEN in mainstream schools within compulsory education varied from 42.1% in Vorarlberg to 82.2% in Carinthia (Wimmer & Oberwimmer, 2021). Again, these differences cannot be explained by differences in the population, however,

they rather occur due to different traditions and practices in the federal states' allocation systems.

Why is this relevant? This situation stresses that it does not make sense to classify SEN by attempting to define guidelines and diagnostic criteria. Rather, what is needed, is a radically different approach that does not attempt to define disability as an individual characteristic of a student, but one that focuses on systemic barriers and limitations, based on the social understanding of the concept of disability (as understood in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006) and guided by the purpose of developing a school that is suitable for all learners.

### Inclusion and equity in education

How can we foster inclusive school development? What are the levers for change? Mel Ainscow (2020) assumes that there are two essential mechanisms for initiating or managing change towards an inclusive school system: Clarity of purpose on the one hand and the leading effect of the evidence on the other hand. Clarity of purpose means a common clarity of direction; it must be clear to everyone involved that the path is leading towards inclusion and equity. All involved persons in a school must agree on these guiding principles for joint action. These principles provide the necessary direction for action and inform all aspects of educational policy, all actions and common guidelines.

Engaging with evidence means to rely on the daily practice of teachers, to look at their experience, to identify strengths that can be built on and barriers that need to be overcome in order to create policies for the whole school that are inclusive and equitable. Summed up, school development is underpinned by inclusive principles on the one hand and influenced as well as driven by evidence on the other (Ainscow, 2020).

Guided by these two essential mechanisms, school development does not operate in a vacuum. It is linked to the regulations and obligations of the school administration as well as to the expectations of the community. It operates in the tension between the management guidelines of the administration and the Education Department, and the support from the community, such as municipalities, civil society, associations and communities in general. A very important consequence of this model of inclusive school development should be to give schools freedom for autonomy, free spaces to make their own decisions fitting their very specific needs and requirements (Ainscow, 2020).

When it comes to inclusive teaching, different didactic approaches are currently discussed in the literature (Prengel, 2019; Seitz, 2009). Teaching models in heterogeneous classes focus primarily on aspects of individualization and differentiation in lessons (Paleczek & Seifert, 2020). General didactic models providing a framework for joint lessons for all students without focusing on a specific subject, hence

able to be applied to all subjects and to be implemented in each context of instruction, are scarce. In the following, we briefly present such a model that focuses on general principles of inclusion: participation, sharing and co-operation, including everyone in the classroom. The challenging question is: How can we reach out to all learners, how can we include all learners, also those seen as 'hard to reach'? The model we propose is the use of 'Inclusive Inquiry', a model for the development of inclusive learning and teaching.

The following report is based on the experiences of a large international project in which schools and universities from five partner countries (Spain, Portugal, Denmark, England and Austria) worked together to make teaching as inclusive as possible, to change it in a way that all students can be reached (https://reachingthehardtoreach.eu/). The project aims to respond to learner diversity in inclusive ways through the active participation of students. This means to include all students, also those who might seem as "hard to reach" and to enhance the access, participation and learning performance of all children, ensuring that no child is left out or marginalized (Messiou et al., 2020).

To reach these aims, we used a research-based model of teacher professional development that encouraged dialogue between students and teachers and included the results of this dialogue in a lesson development process (Ainscow et al., 2016). To include the views of all students, it was necessary to design new techniques for collecting their views. Participatory research with children was a vital part in this process of including student views into the lesson development.

Who can be defined as "hard to reach"? Frequently, we think about persons with disabilities or from another cultural background as being "hard to reach". In the idea of Inclusive Inquiry, every person can be "hard to reach" at some point in a lesson: when the content is too easy, boring or too difficult, when we are emotionally preoccupied, etc. Trying to find ways to reach all students makes it necessary to change the perspective: The student is not hard to reach, but the lesson is not adapted to the needs of all students. This means to change the perspective from focusing on students to a focus on the lesson, identifying the lesson as "hard to reach". The consequence should be to provide lessons accessible for all, lessons that reach out to all students. This new view demands to avoid stigmata and to look at the needs of all students. It means to take into account all students, also those who do not fit into a certain category and are therefore not "labelled" or subject to special offers. It opens a way to consider different needs at all levels without the necessity to categorize or to assign certain labels like "SEN" to certain students. It allows to consider contextual factors and to adapt them to the specific needs of the students.

The aim is to think and enter into a dialogue about the lessons that are adapted to the needs of all students. This begins with a lesson planning process and ends with the reflection after implementing the lesson. The central goal of Inclusive Inquiry is planning lessons that are 'reachable' for all students in a class, rather than iden-

tifying students who have difficulties following lessons (Messiou, 2019), posing the fundamental question: How can we make lessons more inclusive?

Implementing the requirements of inclusion in heterogeneous classes means to encounter very different abilities as well as different emotional and social needs of students. The idea of inclusion is about ensuring that every student can learn in a learning environment that enhances their learning process in the best possible way. For the teachers, this means keeping each student in mind with their individual abilities and strengths and difficulties, implementing high expectations and aspirations for each individual child without exemptions and involving each student in quality teaching. This includes also students with disabilities and students from deprivileged backgrounds. For successful inclusive teaching, it is important to constantly question one's own teaching strategies and improve them with the help of colleagues and students. To initiate and support such way of teaching, the "Inclusive inquiry" method provides important ideas (Messiou & Ainscow, 2021). Messiou and Ainscow (2021) propose an exploratory view of teaching, which is constantly evolving due to action research strategies. This further development draws impulses from the feedback of the students and the teacher colleagues.

## Including the voices of all students

In order to include the voices of students researchers (Adderley et al., 2014; Messiou & Ainscow, 2015) have developed different inspiring methods. Including student voices does not solely refer to asking students about their opinion, but to involve them in the learning process of all students as co-researchers. When students are involved as co-researchers, a joint preparation and introduction to the research process is necessary. A common purpose and understanding of the task to accomplish is to be established, for example designing a lesson in a way that includes all students, assuring that all can participate in the learning process (Ainscow & Messiou, 2017, Messiou & Ainscow, 2020).

In preparing this process, it is first necessary to define the aim and the research question together with the students, and then to initiate the action research process together. This includes elaborating the research method, for example, sharpening the students' observation skills, giving them time to find answers and introducing different methods to make students' voices visible (e.g. photovoice).

Methodologically, the students are trained as co-researchers and as such, they are included in the process. The overall aim is that teaching and learning should motivate and involve all students in a class. When this aim is clear, students identify obstacles and challenges, but they also find solutions and develop a framework that works for all. For teaching, this may signify that sometimes, learning will be

individually differentiated and other times, it will take place in a setting where all students work with the same materials. Both higher and lower performing students can be involved in this process of research. Their opinion is just as the one relevant as that of the other students, they are given time and space to clarify their own opinion just like other researchers. This leads to a new view of teaching, questioning own strategies, and an ongoing development based on the inclusion of students' perspectives (Messiou et al., 2016; Messiou et al., 2020).

## Training student researchers

How can students collect other students' opinions (young students, second language learners, etc.)? In the project, we firstly trained student researchers in research principles and methods (for more information see: https://reachingthehardtoreach.eu/training-manual/). We explained the project, discussed with them what research is and why it is important. We discussed about learning and fostered self-reflection: what supports or hinders my learning? What makes my learning better? What would help me to learn better? What do I enjoy in learning? Finally, we taught them the observation method as one research method and practiced it together (Adderley et al., 2014, Messiou, 2013). In the project, also many other methods to collect the views of students were developed (https://reachingthehardtoreach.eu/pupil-voice-tool-kit/).

After the training, the students observed a lesson, they collected feedback and ideas from peers, they cooperated with the teachers and discussed their own observations and those from their peers in a dialogue between students and teachers.

## The Method: Inclusive Inquiry

The Inclusive Inquiry method (Messiou & Ainscow, 2020) is a lesson development process inspired by the certainty that all we need for an inclusive change is already there, in the schools, in the experience of the teachers, in their abilities and competences. It is important that teachers quit the idea that teaching is something static and individualized, taking place behind closed doors. On the contrary, teaching in this project was understood as a shared process in which several people are involved and which is constantly evolving, benefiting from experiences and constantly changing. It is particularly important that the experiences that are generated contribute to further development. This creates a co-operative and dynamic image of teaching. It is a process of action research and the method consists of three steps: Plan – Teach – Analyse (https://reachingthehardtoreach.eu/guide/).

The first step is to create a team in the school of three teachers. The selection of the three teachers can be based on certain criteria (same interests, sympathy,

teaching in the same grade, etc.), but it can also be completely random. This is left to the individual school. Overall, it is important that the concept only provides a framework. The organization and practical implementation are widely left to the individual school. This leaves enough room to address the specific needs of the individual schools and to take into account the structural conditions.

As soon as the team of three has been determined, the teachers meet to prepare the plan for a lesson together with the children researchers, three children of each of the teachers classrooms.

This lesson is then conducted by one of the teachers, while the other two teachers and the children researchers observe the lesson and document the participating students' experiences. After the lesson, the three teachers meet with the children researchers and the lesson is reflected on together, focusing on how to make the lesson even more inclusive. It is essential that the focus of the joint reflection is not on the teacher or on what they did, but on the question of the jointly planned lesson and on how it can be designed in a way that all children are reached by the lesson, meaning enabling all students to learn. A joint decision is then made as to how the lesson can be changed so that it reaches all students (Ainscow, et al., 2016). Table 1 shows an excerpt example of a lesson plan and the documentation of the changes suggested by the children researchers and the teacher trio.

**Table 1:** Excerpt of a lesson plan

| Time | Procedure | Observations and changes |
|------|-----------|--------------------------|
| 5 min | Reading out the picture book Children sit in a circle | *Reading out the picture book while using a projector due to the high number of pupils in the other classroom* |
| 5 min Group discussion | Letting the children talk about the book Asking questions about the book | |
| 25 min Station work | Introducing and explaining the stations - Cutting out the picture story and organizing it correctly - Finding objects in the book and circling them on the board - Counting and dissecting - Craft station: dragon OR princess Guided working at the stations with simultaneous change of stations Dividing into groups: Children draw color cards and go to the respective station marked with the same color | *Too little time for the individual stations, different working pace of the children; Change for the 2nd cycle: open station working* |

The lesson is then carried out by a second teacher, with the other two teachers and children researchers observing again, followed by another joint discussion, leading to more changes. This plan-teach-analyze process is implemented three times and the end result is a lesson that is as inclusive as possible.

The changes discussed in the process of plan-teach-analyze were numerous and depended on the lesson plan, the teacher trio, the children researchers but also on the feedback received from students participating in the lessons. Interestingly, the learning process in the Inclusive Inquiry was not limited to the changes made to enhance the lesson's inclusivity but also on identifying elements of the lessons that were already working very well in the first lesson planned. Identifying these elements supports teachers in future lesson planning. Examples of changes and elements identified as being inclusive already reached from very

a) basic changes/elements concerning the surrounding (e.g., opening the window to let fresh air enter the classroom and enhance student concentration, switching on the light to work better; putting on calm music)

b) seating arrangements (letting students choose where they want to sit; sitting on the floor)

c) changes/elements concerning the beginning of the lesson (preparing materials beforehand to enter into the working process more quickly; reduction of introductory phases)

d) changes concerning the equipment/materials used (using a beamer for the students to see the pictures in the book; all students using a piece of paper to take notes; not using word cards)

e) changes to keep the students focused (teacher reads the story instead of letting the students read it out loudly; using noise-cancelling headphones)

f) changes to enhance motivation and fun in the lesson (using stamps; letting students move/jump)

g) changes/elements concerning forms of cooperation (peer support, group work)

The feedback from teachers and students showed that this process of Inclusive Inquiry had two main effects: the teachers feel more involved, supported and relieved, the joint reflection encourages them to make changes in the classroom, the students are much more involved in the lessons and feel responsible for the joint learning (Bešić et al., 2023).

Even though the process of Inclusive Inquiry was well-received, there were challenges, namely the amount of time needed to properly implement the Inclusive Inquiry model. Especially, in Grade 4 (at which point in Austria, students are facing an elevated number of assessments), the realization of the whole concept of Inclusive Inquiry was seen as challenging, since students as children researchers missed lessons while observing other lessons. Also, teachers were missing other

lessons while observing a colleague's lesson, meaning other teachers needed to substitute, which, in some schools might be impossible due to lacking resources. This time must be provided by the school management; hence, the school management has to be involved in the whole process and to support it. But when the time to realize Inclusive Inquiry is made available, it is seen as very rewarding by all those involved.

## Conclusions

In this article we introduced a model that allows inclusive teaching development in a very comprehensive way. It is a model of lesson development that can be implemented in each lesson and that can be adapted for specific contents. It refers to the theoretical concepts of inclusion and equity as guiding principles, engaging with evidence as a mechanism for change.

Teachers conduct a circle of collaborative action research to share and extend their teaching experiences. The participative approach of Inclusive Inquiry is including voices of students in class, engaging with evidence and while considering that all what is needed to make lessons more inclusive is already being there in the schools. It is based on the knowledge that teachers already possess manicfold experience and extensive knowledge. The project's aim was to make this knowledge available for inclusive lesson development and to foster inclusion through the participation of all children to make lessons more inclusive.

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