Intersectionality: A pathway towards inclusive education?

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Abstract This article aligns with recent international approaches to inclusive education and argues for a broadened understanding of the term, specifically in the context of Austria, which currently focuses only on children with disabilities. The article not only sets out the thesis of intersectionality, but calls for the adoption of an intersectional lens in inclusive education in order to identify the interaction of multiple factors that lead to discriminatory processes in schools towards different student groups. Inclusive education means opening access to a wide range of educational and social opportunities for all children, not only those with disabilities or identified special education needs. The current system, in which children possess one identity marker, does not provide the support children need. Furthermore, it also reinforces inequalities not only within the education system, but also within society at large.

Keywords Inclusive education · Intersectionality · Power · Social categories

Introduction

Inclusive education requires the equal participation of all children in the educational system (UNESCO 2005). Yet, the idea of inclusive education is highly contested and, since education occurs at the national level, its definition varies significantly from country to country (Waitoller and Artiles 2013). In Austria, for example, inclusive education is largely perceived as concerning only students with disabilities (Feyerer 2012), putting other marginalized groups, for example refugee children with disabilities, at a disadvantage.

In general, research in the inclusive education context has focused primarily on the joint schooling of children with and without disabilities. Numerous studies have examined the academic achievement of students with and without disabilities, teacher practices,

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the aspect of social-emotional inclusion and attitudes towards inclusive education (Farrell et al. 2007; Reicher 2010; de Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert 2012; Baeten and Simons 2014). Certainly, these studies have provided fertile ground for the field of inclusive education research. However, these studies fail to acknowledge that inclusive education does not only refer to the inclusion of children with disabilities, but also aims to guarantee a system suitable for all learners and their unique requirements (UNESCO 2009). Using the term “inclusive education”, but focusing only on children with disabilities, is not sufficient; in this context it is necessary to expand the term to incorporate the inclusion of all children.

In line with this approach, in this article I argue for the need for broadening the definition of inclusive education in the school context. I provide a short definition of inclusive education and intersectionality, then assess the relationship between inclusive education and intersectionality, illustrating how intersectionality can be helpful for the successful implementation of inclusive education.

Inclusive education: A brief definition

While the educational framework of inclusion is fundamentally about the participation of *all* students in the educational system (UNESCO 2005), the concept of inclusive education has competing definitions that vary from nation to nation (Waitoller and Kozleski 2013). UNESCO defines “inclusion” in the following manner:

Inclusion is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children. (UNESCO 2005, p. 13)

According to UNESCO (2005), inclusion is about working *with* and learning *from* the diversity of children. Barriers should be identified and eliminated, and groups with a particularly high risk of being excluded should be closely monitored in order to counteract these forces (UNESCO 2005). In this framework, inclusion means the “reform and reconstruction of the school as a whole” (Mittler 2006, p. 2), which would force schools to act more responsively to its students’ varying needs. The main goal of inclusive education is to open access to a wide range of educational and social opportunities for all children, regardless of their position in society (Mittler 2006). As other scholars have mentioned, the emphasis of inclusion is on high-quality education, human rights, equal opportunities and social justice (Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou 2011).

Inclusion, put another way, is interested in any type of exclusion experienced by any child, not just those children with disabilities and the ones recognized as having special education needs (SEN) (UNESCO 2005; Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006; Mittler 2006). In addition to focusing on children with SEN, other target groups for inclusion include linguistic, religious and ethnic minorities, children in warzones, children affected by poverty, and refugee children (UNESCO 2005). This enlarged focus on all children is important, given the crucial role that education plays in basic human rights and in future life opportunities relating to social and economic outcomes. As Smyth and McCoy (2009) have pointed out, young people who experience educational disadvantage are also likely to experience restricted life chances later in life.

Although authors have argued for this expanded definition of inclusion since the late 1990s (see Ainscow 1999), the tendency to approach inclusion as solely concerning students with disabilities (i.e., SEN) within mainstream educational settings—as was the case with the integration approach (Vislie 2003)—is still prevalent in Austria (Feyerer 2012). Moreover, although the terms have different meanings, ‘integration’ and ‘inclusion’ are still mostly used interchangeably in Austria, leading to the common practice of using the terms with a forward slash (“Integration/Inklusion”), which, when expressed this way, actually combines the terms (for a detailed overview of integration vs. inclusion, see Vislie 2003).

Not only has research about inclusive education mostly concentrated on children with disabilities, but so have the policy measures enacted by the Austrian government over the last several years. In 2012, for example, Austria published an action plan to implement inclusive education by 2020 (BMAK 2012). This plan’s focus can be gleaned from its name—the National Action Plan for Disabilities 2012–2020—concentrating on children with disabilities, with the end goal of reducing special schools. Of course, this attention to children with disabilities has improved their general situation in the Austrian school system (Specht et al. 2007; Bešić, Paleczek, Krammer, and Gasteiger-Klicpera 2016). Nevertheless, although inclusive education in Austria emerged out of the need for an equitable and just educational system for children with disabilities who had been historically excluded from the mainstream school system (Sullivan and King 2010), exclusion, as a phenomenon of experience, is not only reserved for students with disabilities. Educational exclusion, marginalization and discrimination are important phenomena affecting students who do not attend school due to various reasons, ranging from being denied basic physical access based on a disability to “those [students] who attend school but are segregated or discriminated against because of their migrant background, gender, race, socio-economic status or other characteristics” (UNESCO IBE 2008, p. 12). Solely focusing on children with disabilities, furthermore, leads to various consequences, one of which is the misconception that inclusive education falls within the parameters of special education. This drives the false perception that experiences of exclusion only affect children with disabilities, thus restricting the analysis of exclusion, marginalization and discrimination within the educational system to only one group of students (i.e. students with disabilities) (UNESCO IBE 2008). According to Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2006), by solely focusing on students with disabilities, scholars and practitioners tend to undermine and distract from the central focus of inclusive education, namely, the effort to promote change in the existing educational system in order to enable a school for *all*. It is necessary to keep in mind that ‘inclusion is an aspiration for a democratic education and, as such, the project of inclusion addresses the experiences of all students at school’ (Slee 2001, p. 168) and not only the ones with disabilities.

One cannot forget that most individuals found to have a disability also have another characteristic (an identity marker recognized by society) that could marginalize them even more than their disability. Many students with disabilities, for example, could come from racial minority and/or low-income households, or perhaps are second language learners (L2). Hence, scholars need to recognize the ‘simultaneous intersections’ (García and Ortiz 2013) between, for instance, race, class, gender, (dis)ability, language abilities and national origins. All of these need to be considered when discussing inclusive education (Kozleski, Artiles, and Waitoller 2014).

Various factors (e.g., power relations or categories) shape an education system and an individual’s experience within it, and processes of discrimination, exclusion, and marginalization are ubiquitous. Hence, inclusive education is not implemented in a vacuum. “The societies in which inclusion is carried out are historically stratified, in part as the result of

the influence of power” (Kozleski, Artiles, and Waitoller 2014, p. 239) and therefore “educational institutions are enveloped in socio-historical gravity” (Erickson 2004, as cited in Kozleski, Artiles, and Waitoller 2014, p. 239). In other words, to successfully implement inclusion, one must first understand the society it is to be implemented in.

These intersections of identity and the wider society call for a re-centering of discourse about inclusive education at the intersection—or crossroads—of students’ different identities. It requires, moreover, scholars to adopt a significantly more nuanced research approach that avoids the shortsighted perception of individuals as possessing only one identity marker and takes the socio-historical gravity of a society into account (Crenshaw 1989).

Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw reacted to this shortsighted perception of individuals and developed her idea of intersectionality. Originally, she used the term to analyse the multiple and overlapping discrimination experienced by African-American women in the American context (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). To summarize her argument, Crenshaw asserted that anti-discrimination legislation in the United States did not actually protect African-American women because, when making legal claims against an employer, this particular group of women had to choose between either their race or gender, even though the discrimination they faced came at the “intersection” between these two identities. According to Crenshaw (1989), this “single-axes-framework”, where race and gender are seen as “mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis”, is obsolete (p. 139). In her view, African-American women are discriminated against as African-American women, and this discrimination does not happen in the same way as it does for white women or African-American men. In other words, when analysing discrimination and an individual’s experience of it, differences within groups should also be considered. Moreover, this discrimination should not be seen reductively as just sexism added to racism or vice-versa. Rather, these distinct discriminations (e.g., sexism, ableism, racism) should be seen as a unified system that generates discrimination (e.g., oppression).

In contrast to other theories that view discrimination as largely falling on a single identity marker of an individual, intersectionality asserts that *all* aspects of one’s identity need to be examined as simultaneously interacting with each other and affecting one’s perception within a society. Moreover, these features of identity cannot simply be observed separately (Cooper 2016). The different aspects of one’s identity are not “unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but . . . reciprocally constructing phenomena” (Collins 2015, p. 2). These identities intersect to create a whole that is different from the component identities. Intersectionality asserts that to comprehend truly an individual’s identity and experience, one first needs to recognize that each identity marker is connected with all other markers within that individual (Crenshaw 1991). In other words, this means that a Muslim-Bosnian female under the age of 30, for example, is simultaneously a Muslim, a Bosnian, a female, and under the age 30. These identities do not exist in a vacuum, but rather are intimately connected to how the world perceives that particular individual (see Figure 1).

Intersectionality, however, does not just argue that individuals have intersecting identities, and it should not be understood as just a more nuanced view of someone’s personal identity. It also explains, through the concept of “difference” (Minda 1995), how some identity groups are excluded, while others are included through a type of inherent privilege

in their society (Nash 2008). It is also important to note that there are differences not only between these groups, but also within each group. By also offering an overarching analysis of power hierarchies present between and within groups, intersectionality shows its usefulness as an approach for examining societal relations. According to Cho and colleagues (2013, p. 795), “what makes an analysis intersectional . . . is its . . . intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power”.

Power and power relations determine who gets to be represented in society and on whose terms. The idea of power has numerous characteristics and competing definitions. In this article I use Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “symbolic power”, or the uncritical acceptance of terms, language, and discourse by a particular social community. According to Bourdieu (1991, p. 170), symbolic power “is defined in and through a given relation between those who exercise power and those who submit to it, i.e., in the very structure of the field in which *belief* is produced and reproduced”. Importantly, since representations constructed by symbols (e.g., skin color, ability, articulation) mould us to visualize the world in a particular way, those who wield symbolic power (the control over these symbols) also possess actual political power in society, which produces consequences in reality. These consequences can take the shape of attitudes towards a specific group of people (e.g., negative attitudes towards refugees), resulting in a specific perception of these people (e.g., that they take advantage of the social system) that is then perpetuated throughout society.

This means that the language and discourse of a particular community becomes legitimated by having its members believe—or *buy into*—the objectivity of that discourse. Put another way, since members of the community fail to realize that this discourse is inherently subjective, by uncritically accepting what is being offered as “reality”, this reality actually becomes extremely powerful and holds a tremendous amount of persuasive power over that community (Maxim 1998, p. 408).

Symbolic power, however, does not only work at the theoretical level, but it is also at play in the educational system. The language used by teachers, for example, carries a tremendous amount of symbolic power. As Bourdieu (1991) also argues, language production is planned and deliberate, used in a way to achieve a certain goal by the authority behind it. Bourdieu (1986) also contends that access to social, financial, and cultural capital varies widely for different groups in society. The problem of accessibility makes it difficult, for example, for students from low socio-economic households to have the economic and social capital to enter higher educational institutions. This hinders their educational success (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). These students are disadvantaged in comparison with students coming from higher socio-economic households who have access to the social and economic capital that the community has determined valuable (Walgenbach 2017).

The same can be said for cultural capital. The less cultural capital (e.g., education) a person has, the more difficult it is for a person to move between social strata, which also increases social inequality within the community (Bronner and Paulus 2017). According to Bourdieu, this mechanism not only consolidates the hierarchical social order, but it also leads to an internalization of the social order, because the availability of capital or the knowledge of resources “organizes the perception of the social world” (Bourdieu 1987, p. 549, as cited in Bronner and Paulus 2017, p. 19).

Intersectionality illustrates this relationship between different groups in society and power relations (Bronner and Paulus 2017). By examining the effects of power—or how power structures are present within a particular society—intersectionality also uncovers how privilege functions. Intersectionality is therefore a concept that, on one hand, considers the differences between individual identities and, on the other, takes into account social

power structures and the social inequality that results from them (Walgenbach 2017). It recognizes that these two poles are mutually determinative and reproducible. Hence, intersectional analyses evoke the multifaceted and linking nature of oppression and subordination on the basis of sources of social disadvantage such as gender, race, class, and (dis)ability (Davis 2008). For a better understanding of intersectionality, see Figure 1.

To be most helpful, Figure 1—which illustrates the aspects of intersectionality described above—should be viewed from the inside out, that is, from the inside of the “onion” to its outer edges. The very core of the onion, in this metaphor, is the individual. As the figure shows, an individual has many different identity markers, not all of which can be observed separately because each of these markers intersects with the others, as demonstrated by the Venn diagram. This figure makes clear that it is incredibly difficult to recognize where one identity marker begins and where another ends. It demonstrates that an individual possesses multiple identities simultaneously, all of which contribute not only to how they see themselves, but also to how they are seen by society.

Figure 1 The intersection onion
Source: Created by the author

The next layer of the figure, “Group Membership”, illustrates how individuals perceived to be the same are categorized together as members of one particular group. These group memberships, it is important to note, create and maintain difference between the varying groups. This difference and group membership not only influence the manner in which society perceives that individual, but also shape one’s experiences. Keeping intersectionality in mind, however, individuals, with their intersecting identities, are also simultaneously embedded within multiple group memberships, meaning they do not belong to just one particular group in one particular situation, but rather to all groups at a particular time.

The categorization of individuals into different groups is a practice done by society. Layer three of the figure, “Social Context”, illustrates this. Within this layer of the “onion”, numerous concepts—such as privilege, power, social construction, and attitudes—come into play, which show the social relations an individual resides in.

The last layer of the figure, “Unified System of Oppression”, shows the major mechanisms of discrimination. This outer layer of the “onion” represents the whole outside world with which an individual is confronted and reveals that these systems of oppression act in unison with one another. Taken together, the “onion” metaphor shows how individuals tend to be seen based on their visible identity markers, or the ones that can be found in the outermost layer. These identity markers, importantly, are thought to be the same for all members of a particular group (just like every onion looks the same from the outside). When this is the case, different layers of an individual—other identity markers—may not be visible at first glance.

Intersectionality in the context of inclusive education

Although intersectionality, as described above, has mainly been used as a concept in gender studies (Nash 2008), scholars from other fields have begun to adapt it to their own research (Jiménez-Castellanos and García 2017). While intersectionality in the field of inclusive education is still seen by many scholars as a “future perspective”, it is beginning to gain traction (Artiles, Dorn, and Bal 2016).

According to Grant and Zwier (2011), using intersectionality in the educational context allows for the analysis of simultaneous interactions among, for example, gender, (dis)ability, migrant background, race, and class for any individual child, as well as the interplay between these individual or group characteristics and organizational responses to them. Hence, intersectionality helps explain how certain students (e.g., a refugee student with behavioural disorders) encounter varying levels of exclusion in schools because of the ways in which schools address or fail to address the intersection of their identities and, instead, respond to only one aspect of students’ needs (Waitoller and Kozleski 2013). Schools, for instance, provide a child with disability services in relation to his/her disability, and a refugee child receives support with language learning or trauma experience. But what happens to the child who is a refugee and has a disability?

As Walgenbach (2017) points out, since these identity markers are not clearly divided, and the jurisdiction of responsibility is not clearly defined, this child will not get the support services he/she needs. How these children are perceived to be different can subsume their identity and capability, which leads to a monolithic view of children. These uniform views of students, embedded in educational policies, narrow the lens through which educators can support learning within the institutional contexts in which they work. Therefore, once a student is identified as needing specialized support in a specific area, other aspects of that student’s needs may be pushed aside or overlooked.

Recent research, for example, has revealed that students with a refugee background in Austrian schools feel sufficiently supported in their attempts to learn German, but help with other subjects is largely absent (Bešić, Gasteiger-Klicpera, Buchart, Hafner, and Stefitz 2020). This is because services for learning, behavioural and language support may be structured separately. Thus, teacher skill sets are often distributed across roles that are also categorized by student differences (Waitoller and Kozleski 2013).

It is precisely here that intersectionality can prove most useful. It offers an approach that can “more comprehensively answer questions” of need, justice and equity in today’s schools through analysing and conceptualizing educational questions through a multi-axis approach (Grant and Zwier 2011). Other scholars also agree on the need to have a multi-axis approach in inclusive education. According to Slee (2001), for example, “the discussion across intersections of class, race, gender and disability reminds us both of the specificity and the general applications of claims for inclusive education” (p. 103).

It should be acknowledged that inclusive education is a long-term process that, at its core, tries to develop effective strategies to combat exclusion in an ever-more diverse environment. In its attempt to counteract exclusion and respond positively to diversity, inclusion is an always-evolving concept (Ainscow 1999). Similarly, intersectionality must also be thought of dynamically, for it is also ever-changing in response to new developments and complicated social inequalities that ebb and flow with time. It is a process of change, constantly developing in response to a unified system of oppression.

Relating to inclusive education, intersectionality can be used to emphasize the notion that students who are marginalized or discriminated against often experience multiple forms of marginalization and discrimination not only at the individual level, but also at the level of the institution. These effects create the kind of social and educational stratification that inclusive education activists seek to counteract, but, instead, are trapped in because these same activists fail to consider the intersecting nature of these effects in the ways in which they define and implement inclusive education (Hancock 2007). If researchers were to combine both of these concepts, then, intersectionality would help identify the processes of discrimination and exclusion, while inclusion would help tackle these problems and create the most successful educational landscape possible for all students.

Critical to both intersectionality and inclusion is the idea that the categories used for human characteristics (identity markers) are socially constructed. These categories create differences between groups, which are perpetuated and reinforced by society (Gillborn 2015). Social differences are not pre-existing and natural, but are produced and reproduced in the interactions and social fields of institutions. Using Bourdieu’s previously stated approach (1991), social categories such as “migrant” and “refugee” are arbitrary cultural constructions that are used to legitimate and explain difference and maintain society’s social order.

The core idea of social constructivism is that every human being grows up in a world already pre-structured by humans, and that social reality is produced and maintained interactively. It is about the “interaction of the individual and socialization” and the “communicative constitution of our world” (Siebert 2004, p. 99). Individuals are constantly constructing social reality in combination with others (Bourdieu 1991). Socially constructed categories are commonly seen as being stuck in a binary choice: girl or boy, migrant or non-migrant, black or white. Such a distinction can be seen as two sides of a coin, in which the one side is not conceivable without the other, but simultaneously excludes the other. Furthermore, this division of the whole marks the difference as hierarchical: students (without further description because they fit the norm of society) and those with a migrant

background, a refugee status, and a disability. Such distinctions are arbitrary and could be constructed in different ways. These distinctions, however, are seldom questioned. A migrant student and a student with a disability are quickly and firstly defined in terms of these characteristics; all other characteristics follow. These socially constructed categories interact with each other and create a social hierarchy and a system of disadvantages (Bräu 2015).

It is important to remember that these categories (whether it is a student's migrant background, refugee status or disability) should not be seen as the cause of issues within the education system. Rather, it is the meaning that these categories carry, a meaning that is construed by the society around them. Social stigma is attached to these categories, which leads to various forms of discrimination and exclusion due to "dominant social, political, and institutional arrangements regarding access and participation" in schools and society (Green et al. 2005, as cited in Artiles, Dorn, and Bal 2016, p. 778). In the use of the term "student with migrant background", or any other socially constructed category, certain exceptions or, better said, certain stereotypes, stigmas and prejudices are conveyed. These categories possess a certain amount of meaning and can influence children's educational paths. Certain group memberships are given privileged status, while others are given a disadvantaged one. Privilege, however, is not just assigned by terms attached to children, but it is also tied to the social, financial and cultural capital of particular groups, which also influences the over/underrepresentation of children in different school types, further influencing their future educational path.

Here, it is essential to note the decisive role power hierarchies play in societies and how these hierarchies influence the educational paths of children. Within these hierarchies, some identity groups will be excluded to the detriment of others because of how the society perceives them (Nash 2008). This ranking of groups assigns varying amounts of privilege to each group. In order to see how this privilege functions in a particular society, it is important to have a general understanding of power and its consequences.

It is also necessary to recognize the role of power in constructing the above-mentioned categories throughout the history of education. The evidence on the placement of children with migrant backgrounds and children with disabilities in less academically challenging schools (for examples in Austria, see Luciak and Biewer 2011), or even segregating them from mainstream classrooms, brings the workings of power to light. Therefore, it is important to recognize that the intersection of different identity markers and the intersection with historically perpetuated inequalities within a stratified society influence the educational outcomes for students as well. Inclusive education—in the Austrian context, but also elsewhere—cannot afford to ignore these intersections and the legacies of discrimination towards specific groups of students.

Conclusions

In this article I have defined "inclusive education" and stressed the importance of broadening the scope of inclusive education—specifically in Austria, which currently focuses only on children with disabilities—towards an expanded definition that addresses *all* students. This was followed by an introduction of the main theoretical lens: intersectionality. I have not only laid out the thesis of intersectionality, but also argued that an intersectional lens in inclusive education is essential in order to identify the interaction of multiple factors that lead to discriminatory processes in schools towards different student groups. Furthermore,

I showed that within group differences need to be considered when discussing inclusive education.

Although intersectionality has been underutilized in inclusive education research, I stress the importance of “thinking intersectionally” in inclusive educational research and in practice in schools. Put another way, moving the current focus from children with disabilities towards all children highlights the need to broaden the definition of inclusive education (in the Austrian context). The broadening of the definition of inclusive education in Austria is necessary because current inclusive education measurements and policies are concentrated exclusively on children with disabilities. Admittedly, this focus allowed important structural changes within the system to occur for children with disabilities. However, *within*-group differences also need to be examined. By focusing on only one identity marker (e.g., disability), researchers and practitioners miss the bigger picture, namely, that students are excluded/discriminated against on multiple levels. The use of a single-axis framework does not do justice to inclusive education because most individuals who are found to have a disability also have another identity that often marginalizes them even more (Slee 2001). Furthermore, focusing on only one factor of difference in explaining the educational success or failure of certain student groups simplifies a complex situation. Implying that the education system exists in a vacuum, and is not influenced by society and the processes that happen within the society, is also misleading. These considerations make it necessary to re-center discourse about inclusive education at the intersection not only of different identity markers related to the students themselves but also of the system and wider society; adopting a significantly more nuanced research approach and avoiding the short-sighted depiction of individuals regarding only one identity marker (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Hancock 2007). In order to change the system, scholars need to analyse all exclusionary, marginalizing factors in the school system, not just among different student groups, but also within them.

Admittedly, complications arise when putting this theory into practice. Implementing inclusive education in this expanded definition will likely require not only changes in attitudes, but also changes in practices at every level of the education system. Nevertheless, as long as a single category of difference among children (primarily disability) continues to be the main focus of inclusive education, its further implementation will be fraught with assumptions that inclusive education is only the further development of special education. This is especially alarming when it is noted that each child is not only a child with disabilities, but is also a child with numerous other identities. If scholars and practitioners fail to see within-group differences in each of these groups, the children facing intersectional discrimination will be rendered invisible or will be underserved concerning the specific needs they have. There is a need in inclusive education to challenge the status quo by disrupting educational policies and practices that maintain the focus on children with disabilities, while continuing to marginalize others, including those for whom two or more axes of difference intersect (i.e. disability and refugee status).

To conclude, inclusive education should be grounded in a deeper understanding of the students served by schools nowadays and involve critical awareness of the cultural-historical legacies of (dis)advantage that permeate schools and other social institutions, particularly at a time when such conditions are becoming even more complicated due to migration movements and globalization.

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