Equality? Inclusion? Do They Go Hand-in-hand? Policy Makers' Perceptions of Inclusion of Pupils with Special Needs – An Exploratory Study

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Abstract Using Critical Discourse Analysis, this study aims to elicit and expose the perceptions and attitudes of different policy makers in leadership positions at the Ministry of Education in Israel with regard to inclusion. The first stage of the research consisted of individual in-depth semi-structured interviews (N=8). In the second stage the participants (N=21) responded to a written questionnaire (Perceptions about Inclusive Education – PIE) and then took part in group discussions. The texts of the interviews and the group discussions were analyzed using qualitative measures. The findings point to a sensitive situation, one that is difficult to deal with and creates much disagreement. Although inclusion is the official and unanimously agreed upon policy, the discourse reflects some differences between and within groups of policy makers with regard to several issues: identification of the target population; factors and key figures affecting implementation and teacher training.

Keywords Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Inclusion, Policy Makers, Pupils with SEN

1. Introduction

The idea for this research emerged during a discussion among faculty members of the special education department in a teacher training college. It was based on an uncomfortable feeling as well as research evidence from Israel[1] that inclusion is an unclear concept among various stakeholders and policy makers. Our sense was that contradicting forces exist. We would suggest that the blunt descriptor, 'hot potato', as defined in the *Cambridge Dictionary On-Line*[2] is appropriate for describing the attitude toward students with special educational needs (SEN) in Israel who are included in regular education. The dictionary defines 'hot potato' as a problem or an issue that is difficult to deal with and causes much disagreement, a delicate situation that has to be handled with extreme care. We set out to clarify these differences.

In Israel, the 1994 mandate to integrate youngsters with SEN into the regular education system was viewed as an extension of the Special Education Law of 1988. However, the concept of inclusion has been both ideologically and linguistically ambiguous as well as leading to difficulties in implementation that have been reported time and time again. In the summer of 2012, inclusion was once again emphasized as the official policy of the Ministry of Education through an initiative known as "The Inclusion Objective" which will be described later. The data for this exploratory study however, were collected prior to this initiative.

The discourse of different policy makers holding leadership positions within the Ministry of Education was examined in an attempt to elicit their perceptions and attitudes about inclusion of students with SEN.

This paper presents an exploratory study aimed at exposing and comparing the perceptions and attitudes of those in leadership positions in three different departments at the Israeli Ministry of Education with regard to students with SEN. These were: the Department of Early Childhood Education (DECE); the Department of Elementary Education (DEE) and the Department of Special Education (DSE).

1.1. Inclusive Education

Two decades ago, the Salamanca Conference on Special Needs Education endorsed the idea of inclusive education (UNESCO 1994). The declaration issued at the end of this conference stated:

…regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating

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[1] See for example: Braun-Lewensohn, 2015; Leyser, Zeiger and Romi, 2011; Timor and Burton, 2006.
[2] www.dictionary.campridge.org. retrieved on Oct. 10th 2015.

discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all (ibid. p. ix).

During the subsequent years, there have been considerable efforts in many countries to move educational policy and practices in a more inclusive direction (Ainscow and Cesar 2006). However, since Salamanca, the term 'inclusive education' has taken on multiple meanings across the globe and despite national policies that promote mainstreaming and inclusion, there is evidence of confusion and uncertainties among policymakers and practitioners with regard to what inclusion is and how it ought to be carried out (Slee 2001; Ainscow 2008; Ainscow and Miles 2008;). Much work is being carried out by UNESCO (2005; 2009) and by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (Bauer, Kaprova, Michaelidou, and Pluhar 2009) with regard to setting policy guidelines and offering key principles for promoting inclusion. There is global agreement that (a) the biggest challenge facing school systems is that of responding to diversity and (b) the over-all aim of inclusive education is to respond adequately to diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability and to eliminate social exclusion (see for example: Ainscow 2008). The latter is perceived to be a consequence of attitudes and misconceptions about diversity and difference. Inclusion and participation are essential to human dignity and to the enjoyment and exercise of human rights. As such, inclusion necessitates a holistic approach to education as echoed in the philosophy of the Education for All (EfA) frameworks: Inclusive education is not about special educational needs, it is about all students (Slee 2001, Pp. 116). Others (for example: Miles and Sindal 2010) suggest that inclusive education should be understood as the core of EfA.

Opertti, Brady and Duncombe (2009) present four key features of inclusive education that together provide a holistic approach to quality education for all: (a) access to quality education; (b) responding to diversity; (c) identifying and removing barriers to participation and learning; (d) minimizing marginalization and exclusion of students and underachievement. The authors go on to point out that the practice of inclusive education reflects planning processes, allocation of resources and consideration of impacts pursued and attained and that a clear and unified policy of inclusive education affects the practice.

1.2. The Making of Educational Policy

As a rule, a policy statement declares intended actions set out to change existing conditions and practices. Policies are set by those who have the ability and the power to influence what is going on. Thus, policy making is characterized by unequal power relationships (Liasidou, 2011). As a result, policy is very often the result of intense struggles between different social forces.

Policies don't normally tell you what to do, they create

circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do is narrowed or changed, or particular goals or options are set (Ball 1994).

Some policy analysts (for example: Slee 2001; Liasidou 2011) have argued that it would be naïve to assume that legal mandates will ensure the development of appropriate practices. Positive perceptions and welcoming attitudes may encourage appropriate policies and practices while negative perceptions and attitudes tend to sustain lower expectations and unwelcoming practices.

Current international policies in education include a policy of inclusion that promotes the recognition of diversity among students, supports the provision of education to all children of school age and focuses on accessibility and participation as well as on equity and equality. However, as Liasidou (2011) cautions:

> [too often] inclusion is misconceived and misinterpreted while the paraphernalia of special education still thrives…..inclusion becomes an elusive endeavor when educational policy and provision does not reflect a paradigm shift from special education imperatives (ibid, p. 896, 897).

1.3. Education in Israel

Education in Israel is mostly public and centrally governed by the Ministry of Education. Special education has been provided since 1948 when the State of Israel was founded, but mainly in separate settings. Mainstreaming of students with SEN in regular schools has been practiced on a voluntary basis since the mid-fifties of the previous century and as mentioned earlier, became mandatory in the early 1990's following the enactment of the Law of Special Education of 1988. This law and the amendments that followed (in particular the 2003 amendment), reflect a commitment to placing pupils with SEN in general education settings. This commitment emphasized the importance of providing support for SEN within the least restrictive environments and preferably in regular education facilities (Al-Yagon and Margalit 2001). By the 1998-99 school – year, all schools in Israel were expected to implement mainstreaming.

Over the past twenty years students with SEN comprised 10% of the total population of school children in Israel. With the rise in mainstream placements over the past decade, nearly 60% (approximately 120,000 pupils) are enrolled in regular (mainstream) classes and the rest are enrolled in special education facilities – either in special classes within regular schools or in special schools.[3]

In July 2012, as part of its overall strategic plan, the Pedagogic Secretariat of the Ministry of Education in Israel issued a directive known as: "The Inclusion Objective" which unequivocally promotes an educational policy of

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[3] The State of the Child in Israel: Statistics, 2014

acceptance and access. The aims of this directive include: making educational settings more inclusive; incorporating special needs education in regular education; minimizing placement in special education settings; promoting a variety of educational opportunities to improve achievement and narrow social and educational gaps. Whereas the Israeli Law of Special Education and the 2003 amendment were initiated mainly by parents of children with SEN, the Inclusion Objective was initiated by officials of the Pedagogy Secretariat of the Ministry of Education.

The underlying assumptions of the study focus on the notion that perceptions affect policies and on the idea that discourse reflects social and political domination.

2. Method

This exploratory study is based on the 'grounded theory' approach (Corbin and Strauss 1990).

After a preparatory stage involving a literature review and brain-storming discussions held by the researchers (the authors and three additional colleagues), three rounds of data collection and analysis were carried out as follows: Round I served as an exploratory stage during which a protocol for an interview was constructed. Eight interviews were conducted and the data collected via these interviews served to create the 'Perceptions about Inclusive Education' (PIE) questionnaire. This written questionnaire was administered in Round II followed immediately by a group discussion. Round III was used for member checking: The results of the data analysis were mailed to all 21 participants. Receipt was confirmed by all and four (19%) commented by return mail.

The participants were 29 persons in leadership positions at the three departments of the Ministry of Education and included the heads of the departments, national supervisors and the like. All but one, were females. The following table presents the breakdown by department:

Table 1.   Participants

	Dept. of early childhood education (DECE)	Dept. of elementary education (DEE)	Dept. of special education (DSE)	Total
Round I	1	2	5	8
Round II	7	9	5	21
Round III (member check)	2	1	1	4

Several instruments were used as follows:

(a)   In-depth semi-structured individual interviews comprised of 18 leading questions (used in Round I). These were constructed following the researchers' brain-storming session and literature review;

(b)   'Perceptions about Inclusive Education' (PIE) questionnaire which was built following content analysis of the individual interviews (Round I). It is comprised of 5

sections (reflecting the themes that emerged in content analysis) and contains a total of 20 statements (See appendix I). The participants (Round II) were asked to circle only the one statement which most reflected their perception in each section.

(c)   After the participants completed the written questionnaires individually, group- discussions were held focusing on the five topics and the reasons participants had for choosing a specific statement. Table 2 summarizes the stages of the study:

Table 2.   The stages of the study

	Procedure	Outcome
Preparatory stage	Researchers brain-storming and a thorough literature review	Questions for individual interviews
Round I	Individual interviews (N=8); Content analysis of the texts	The themes elicited were used to construct the PIE questionnaire
Round II	Administration of the PIE questionnaire (N=21) followed by 3 small group discussions	Findings relating to the research questions
Round III	Member check (N=21)	Reaction to the findings and clarification of attitudes (N=4)

The framework used for data analysis relied on the work of Fairclough and Holes (1995) described henceforth. In order to identify recurring themes, the interview protocols were analyzed using content analysis methodology: relevant units of the texts were coded, using a categorical coding method. The data was analyzed following the steps suggested by Marshall and Rossman (1995) which include organizing the data, identifying categories, themes and patterns, and looking for possible explanations. The process of categorizing the data was repeated several times. To ensure credibility and dependability (Cresswell and Miller 2000) the researchers analyzed the data separately and met frequently to compare categories and resolve differences until unanimous agreement was reached. In addition, we employed discourse analysis. This term refers to the study of meaningful language units larger than a sentence which sheds light on the social meaning of discourses (Van Dijk, 2011). The interdisciplinary approach of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was chosen as it views language as a form of social practice and focuses on the ways social and political domination are reproduced in text and talk. The sociolinguist Norman Fairclough (Fairclough and Holes 1995) developed a three dimensional framework for studying discourse. He combines micro, meso and macro-level interpretation. At the micro-level the analyst considers the text's syntax, metaphoric structure and the rhetoric; the meso level involves studying the text by focusing on how power relations are enacted; at the macro-level, the analyst is concerned with intertextual understanding, trying to recognize the societal currents that are affecting the

discourse being studied. Thus, CDA aims to unveil the unequal power relationships that exist between different stakeholders and policy makers (Liasidou 2011; Van Dijk 2011).

3. Results

Our findings show that while inclusion is the official and unanimously agreed upon policy, the discourse reflects differences between and within groups of stakeholders and policy makers.

Differences were noted between participants whose background and affiliation were with mainstream education and those whose background and affiliations were with special education – the latter focused more on the philosophy and ideology of inclusion, whereas policy makers from mainstream education focused mainly on practical issues involved with the implementation of inclusion.

Two overriding topics stood out: how inclusion is perceived by the participants and what are the main issues involved in its implementation. Further content analysis revealed five core themes as shown in the following table:

Table 3. Outcome of content analysis

Overriding topics	Core Themes
Perceptions of Inclusion	What is inclusion?
	Who is the target population for inclusion?
Issues related to implementation	Factors that promote or hinder inclusion
	Most critical figure in implementation
	Teacher training for inclusive education

Critical discourse analysis of the core themes led us to conclude that the perceptions of inclusion relate to both the macro and the micro level, whereas the implementation relates to the meso level.

At the macro level, almost all the participants (19 out of 21) perceived inclusion as a basic human right, echoing humanistic approaches. The group discussions offered an opportunity to voice perceptions and thoughts, for example:

> Integrating a person with special needs into society is very basic. This can be achieved only if it is practiced from early on. I believe it is a basic right (DECE)

> Everyone has the right to be a part of society. Inclusion of a child with special needs stems from the humanistic approach. Inclusion is a humanistic right… These are fundamental values of a democratic society (DEE)

> Mainstreaming and inclusion stem from humanistic values (DSE)

In addition, the group discussions revealed that in reality each department has its own agenda with regard to over-all

pedagogic objectives, future reforms and the like. The power relations are played out at the meso level. They are evident in relation to the factors that promote or hinder inclusion and in relation to determining the most critical figure in the process of implementing inclusion.

The participants pointed out two factors that could either promote or obstruct inclusion: (a) the attitudes of the individuals involved, be it teachers, school principals, para-professional school staff and the like and (b) the need for an encompassing policy statement. Cultivating and encouraging positive attitudes toward students with SEN will result in their being accepted. A clearly formulated policy was perceived to be necessary. In that respect, the Inclusion Objective of 2012 is an important move in that direction.

Both the home-room teacher and the school principal were considered by the participants to be critical figures in the process of implementing mainstreaming and inclusion. The participants reasoned that both were in leadership positions as well as in daily contact with the students with SEN and therefore had a crucial contribution to implementation. Surprisingly, two figures that are a part of every school staff in Israel were not mentioned by any of the participants - the educational counselor and the Inclusion Teacher (IT). The role of the latter is similar to that of the special education coordinator (SENCO). The IT works individually with students with SEN who are enrolled in the mainstream class and also provides professional consultation to the mainstream home-room and subject matter teachers. This finding calls for further investigation.

Analyzing the rhetoric and the metaphors used at the micro level exposed another aspect of how inclusion is perceived. The participants were asked to identify the target population for inclusion. Conceptual differences, confusion and uncertainty were found both among groups and within the groups of DECE and DSE participants.

The participants from DECE were divided: nearly half (3 out of 7) perceived the target population for inclusion to be children who started out with their peers but had difficulties and were referred for diagnosis; the others perceived the target population for inclusion to be children with severe difficulties who may attend a special pre-school during most of the week and a mainstream pre-school for one or two days a week. The confusion is reflected in the following statements:

> I don't know anything about mainstreaming and inclusion. I have NO idea! (DECE)

> Are we talking about youngsters with disabilities that do not affect their learning? (DEE)

> We know of youngsters who seem to have SEN but have not been assessed or diagnosed as such, yet they require support and special attention (DEE)

The participants from DEE were unanimous in perceiving students with SEN who are enrolled in the special class as the current target population for inclusion, whereas students

with SEN who are enrolled in the mainstream class are perceived as any other student. This reflects a major change in perceptions and attitudes. Those pupils with SEN who were previously considered the target population for inclusion are now considered an integral part of the student body. This is well reflected in the following statements:

> We should think of them as 'regular' students who need specific supports (DEE)

> We used to think of any student with learning difficulties as having to study in a separate class. We are now in agreement that [students with moderate] learning difficulties should be provided for in the 'regular' class. This is why it is called a 'mainstream' class (DEE)

> Still, these pupils may need support and a variety of accommodations which are to be provided by the IT.

Similarly, the participants of DSE perceived the target population as those students who are enrolled in a special education class and may be integrated into a mainstream class for some part of the school day. One of the participants explained in detail:

> An 'included student' is a special education student, whereas a child enrolled in a mainstream class is part of this class and not a special education student. Inclusion takes place when a child who has been excluded is now included (DSE).

We found little or no sharing or collaboration between these three departments and the department of teacher training.

4. Discussion

Recognition of diversity and special needs is a contemporary societal 'bon ton'. Inclusive education is understood as a core philosophy and practice in school culture that promotes access and full participation of all students (Kugelmass 2006; Grenier 2010). It is worthwhile noting that up until 2012 when the Inclusion Objective was published, many of the policy statements which pertain to mainstreaming and inclusion were composed by officials from DSE. As no reference was made to these statements by participants from DEE and DECE, we suggest they were not fully acknowledged or accepted by them.

These perceptions reflect the common practice of providing educational services for students with SEN in Israel. They receive services either while being enrolled in a regular (mainstream) class or in a special education class within the mainstream school. When enrolled in a mainstream class they may be eligible for support given on an individual basis. In terms of budgeting and bureaucracy the students with SEN who are enrolled in a mainstream class are funded by DEE whereas their peers in the special education class are funded by DSE. This leads to a difference in the quality and quantity of services provided.

The mainstream school is an educational arena shared by DEE and DSE. We suggest that special educators holding leadership positions in the Ministry see an existential threat in the implementation of inclusion as "inclusion is not special education". What appears to be a confusion of attitudes and perceptions calls for thorough soul-searching among officials of DSE with regard to the nature of special education. Understanding special education as an independent entity seems to conflict with the idea of acceptance and with the understanding that the movement toward inclusion seeks to promote schools that meet the needs of all students. Professor Anastasia Liasidou (2007) reports similar findings as she analyzes policy documents from Cyprus:

> By no means is inclusive education a new name for special education relocated in mainstream schools. Inclusive education constitutes an entirely new conceptualization aiming to provide effective education not only for disabled children but also for all children who are entitled to be valued and respected as individuals (ibid. p. 344).

We noticed that the difference between groups is mainly between the DECE and the other two groups (DEE and DSE). We suggest this difference may be part of the different perspective of pre-school vs. school (special or elementary education) with regards to curriculum, social learning and organization. For example, the practice of mainstreaming in pre-schools in Israel is based on individual inclusion with personal support whereas in elementary school it is based on three to five pupils with SEN in each class with one support person.

These differences in perception lead to wondering who is perceived to be responsible for the child with SEN? In spite of the declared consensus regarding the idea of inclusion, our analysis sheds light on hidden perceptions. One could bluntly say that the student with SEN is perceived to be a 'hot potato' that is being passed back and forth and who nobody wants to keep. Behind these disagreements lie issues of responsibility, accountability and budgeting for students with SEN. The initiative presented in the Inclusion Objective of 2012 adds to the tension and power struggle among policy makers.

Teacher training for inclusive education was not found to be part of the agenda of the participating policy makers. DECE participants claim that due to the existing load in the training programs there is no room to add new topics in pre-service training. The necessary knowledge and skills should, in their view, be acquired in-service as a professional development activity. DEE and DSE officials think that knowledge and skills regarding children with special needs should be acquired as part of the pre-service training program. There seems to be little agreement among the different departments on this topic.

The contents and curricula of teacher training programs

are determined by the Council of Higher Education and are supervised by the Department of Training and Professional Development within the Ministry. Nonetheless, these major differences in perceptions affect the existing training programs and should be investigated further.

5. Conclusions

These findings raised several questions. As more and more students are enrolled in the mainstream class, what will happen to the special education class? What will happen to the field of special education? Who will be responsible for these students? It seems that hardly anyone is willing to take responsibility for the 'hot potato'.

What have we learned?

Israeli policy makers are in agreement with regard to the idea of inclusion but they disagree on how it should be implemented and most important, on who is the target population for inclusion; It is necessary to bring policy makers together to openly discuss and clarify concepts and beliefs and to create a much needed infrastructure for cooperation and collaborative practices. The introduction of the Inclusion Objective provides an outstanding opportunity to promote and advance these needed changes.

Two years after the completion of the research we met to reflect on our findings. We considered data from a number of additional sources: A Power Point presentation at a national conference where members of DEE met with heads of special education teacher training programs; Revised vision and mission statements we found on websites of several schools; Updated mission statements of DEE, DECE and SPE as published on the web; Occasional encounters and talks with several elementary school principals and with pedagogical instructors from a teacher training program.

We realized that the personnel changes that occurred within the Ministry along with steps taken toward the implementation of the Inclusion Objective had an impact on perception as well as on practice. The new Minister of Education continues to advocate mainstreaming and inclusion of students with SEN. The Pedagogic Secretariat within the Ministry has taken additional steps to support the Inclusion Objective through professional development activities in schools and funding of local initiatives as well as through ministerial pedagogic and curriculum planning.

The updated vision and mission statement of DSE [4] emphasizes a view of acceptance, accessibility and equity. Similarly, the updated vision and mission statement of DEE emphasizes the creation of an inclusive culture.

In terms of taking responsibility for the pupil with SEN, DSE budgets support services including teacher aides and additional individual support for pupils with complex difficulties. DEE budgets learning support for pupils in the mainstream class. Both DSE and DEE seem to perceive the

DSE as a professional guide and leader with regard to mainstreaming and inclusion.

Quite a few of the statements found on websites of different schools pertain to equity and to acceptance of students with SEN, emphasizing the importance of a welcoming school climate.

The issue of teacher training for inclusive education needs to be addressed. Collaboration between the different departments of the Ministry is called for.

This exploratory study lifted the veil covering inclusive policy making in Israel. The findings call for a large scale study that will include policy makers in leadership positions at the ministerial level as well as educational leaders at the school level and practitioners i.e., teachers. One of the pitfalls of this exploratory study has to do with the fact that the researchers involved in the study were a homogeneous group – all of us are special educators. It may have had a bearing on the interpretation of the data collected.

Acknowledgements

Appendix

Perceptions about Inclusive Education: A questionnaire for Policy Makers

Please circle what you think is an appropriate statement (only one).

Thank you for your cooperation.

(A) What is Inclusion?
1. It is a basic human right
2. It encourages diversity among learners
3. It promotes humanistic values
4. It is an act of charity

(A) Who is the target population for inclusion?
1. Students who attend regular classes and get support for their serious difficulties in performing academic tasks.
2. Special education students who are included in regular education.

(B) Factors that promote or hinder inclusion
1. Collaboration
2. Resources and appropriate physical conditions
3. Positive attitudes of teachers
4. A clear policy that promotes inclusion

(C) Most critical figure in implementation
1. The school counselor

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4 education.gov.il/EducationCMS/UNITS/Special

2. The special education teacher (specialist)
3. The homeroom teacher
4. The school principal
5. Other

(D) Teacher training for inclusive education

1. All student teachers should acquire necessary skills and knowledge about students with SEN
2. Nurturing positive attitudes is most important during initial teacher training
3. Collaboration between special and regular education training programs is a must
4. Regular education teachers should acquire skills and knowledge about students with SEN during their professional development activities following initial training
5. Only special education student teachers should acquire skills and knowledge about students with SEN

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