



Inclusion: A Contested Concept

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I understand a contested concept as a concept without any well-defined meaning. Such a concept can be given different interpretations and they can operate in very different discourses. Furthermore, a contested concept represents controversies that can be of profound political and cultural natures.

My point, however, is not to prevent the use of contested concepts. It is precisely their contested nature that makes it possible to facilitate discussions, where agreements and disagreements move a dialogue forward. With reference to educational issues, one can argue (see Skovsmose and Penteadó, in print) that contested concepts provide a fertile soil for pedagogical imaginations.

So let us take a look at the notion of inclusion. Apparently, it is a praiseworthy thing to work for inclusion in an educational domain. There does not seem to be any need of justifying an inclusive education. It seems by itself an attractive thing to do. The question is just how to do it. My point, however, is that inclusion is also a contested concept.

In the following I will: (1) make some observations concerning the contested nature of inclusion; (2) take a closer look at some of the groups of people that might be addressed by an inclusive actions and consider what empowerment could mean for them; (3) address the notion of deficiencialism; and (4) relate the discussion of contested concepts to broader philosophic issues.

Let me also emphasise that the following text does not provide a summary of my talk. Instead, it may serve as a background reading for my talk.

1

Let me present an extreme case. Nazi Germany developed a most brutal example of social inclusion that at the same time was accompanied by the most brutal form of exclusion. Schools were to assume a principal role in forming the mind of the future citizen. And not only schools but also institutions like sport clubs and scouts organisations should help to provide the proper outlook of the citizens of the new Reich. Education should provide the inclusion of children and young citizens into the Nazi order of things.

Certainly we not think of this as any attractive example of inclusive education. We do not even think of it as an example of such an education. Nevertheless, the example emphasises an important point: Inclusion means including somebody into something, and this something might be of the most dubious nature.

Inclusive education was also part of the educational programmes in Maoist China. This was certainly an education that aimed to form students in a particular way. This phenomenon is described by Jung Chang (1991) in *Wild Swans*. She tells how Mao was experienced by students as a legend, as a god, and as infallible. She tells about a complete submission to this general outlook. She tells how any deviant conceptions became impossible. This example also raises an important issue related to an inclusive education; inclusion into what?

Let me refer to a recent school reform taking place in Denmark, which concerns the broad inclusion of children into the “logic of schooling”. The reform included many different elements, and one concerns the length of the school day. This has been extended so that the children spend more time in school. The Danish newspaper *Politiken* (8 September 2015) provides a statistic which shows that Denmark is now registered as the country in Europe in which the children spend the longest time in school. As part of this school reform, however, it is emphasised that the time spent in school need not be composed only of lessons of the traditional format. Being in school could include many different activities. Nevertheless, the children will be integrated into the “logic of schooling”, and one need to consider what this might mean. The logic of schooling can be related to the logic of the market. In order for both parents to be available at the labour market, the children should stay more time in school. We have to do this with an inclusive education: but we really have to consider what this inclusion might mean.

In the two books *The Wretched on the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Masks*, Franz Fanon (2004, 2008) addresses what inclusion could mean considering the colonial order of things. Fanon points out that social inclusion of the colonised is possible only if the colonised imitates the coloniser. The colonised need to give away their identity and establish themselves with white masks. With such a masquerade, inclusion is possible.

With these different references I want to emphasise that we cannot talk about inclusion as any simple and straightforward attractive educational phenomenon. Inclusion means inclusion of some groups into some order of things. This order might be attractive from some perspectives, but it might be highly questionable from other perspectives. Inclusion is a contested issue.

2

Michel Foucault (1994) has used *The Order of Things* as the title of one of his books. I like this notion, although I am using it in a less philosophical way than that meant by Foucault. Inclusion means inclusion of somebody into some order of things.

Inclusion could concern any group of people. It could be a whole population's inclusion into certain worldview. It could concern the inclusion of the colonised into the coloniser's world. It could concern the accommodation of any "other". It could concern the inclusion of the group of refugees that are now moving around in Europe. Inclusion could also concern all kinds of processes of schooling. It could refer to any groups of children.

One can address inclusion through the notion of empowerment. Thus inclusion of somebody into some order could be discussed in terms of the opportunities that might be obtained. Such opportunities could be seen as empowering. But the notion of empowerment is also contested.

Let us start with a classic interpretation related to Paolo Freire's (1972) notion of literacy that can be interpreted in terms of "reading and writing the world". Here "reading" refers to a critical political interpretation of the world and "writing" to some kind of political engagement. Following this interpretation an inclusive education enables students to read and write the world. Empowerment means preparing students for becoming critical citizens. According to this interpretation, an empowering mathematics education is, for instance, illustrated by the works of Eric Gutstein (2006). The idea is clearly pointed out by the title of his book *Reading and Writing the World with Mathematics: Toward a Pedagogy for Social Justice*.

However, one gets a rather different interpretation of empowerment, when one concentrates on the person's individual possibilities. In this case, one can think of an empowering education as one that, for instance, enables students to pursue further studies and career opportunities. According to this interpretation, an empowering mathematics education is found in the Algebra Project organised by Bob Moses and described by Moses and Cobb (2001) in *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project*. The aim of the project taking place in the USA was to improve the quality of mathematics education in poor communities and to provide better access to Further Education for black students. Moses wanted to ensure that black students were not obstructed in their career opportunities by low scores in mathematics. The main aim of the Algebra Project was to ensure black students' access to the established educational system. Thus the aim was not to construct a new

curriculum, but rather to engage the students in the existing curriculum. The Algebra Project illustrates a form of inclusive education. It tends to empower students, but in this case the interpretation of empowerment is rather different from the interpretation illustrated by Eric Gutstein's approach.

Inclusive education not only concerns racial issues, it also concerns ability-groupings. It has been argued that students learn better if they learn together with students with similar abilities. As a consequence, it is claimed that a streaming of the students provides more efficiency to the individual learning processes. This perspective includes a particular interpretation of empowerment, namely as referring to the individual capabilities. Contrasting with this perspective, others have argued that learning in mixed-ability groups provides richer opportunities for learning, as learning is related to processes of negotiating, explaining, and noticing. Again, such a perspective brings forward a rather different conception of empowerment.

The school operates with different forms of groupings with age-grouping as a most common example. If we consider students with different forms of special needs, we find a variety of other forms of groupings. Let us consider blind students. Should they be educated in a particular setting? This could ensure that these students get teachers with a particular professionalism with respect to blindness. Or should one instead try to integrate blind students in the normal classroom, meaning that blind and non-blind students should be taught together?

Addressing such questions means that one needs to address the variety of interpretations of empowerment. One can again consider Freire's perspective and think of empowerment as a way of bringing blind students to read and write the world. And having mathematics in mind, the question becomes how blind students come to read and write the world with mathematics. One can also consider the very different interpretation of empowerment as illustrated by the Algebra Project. Thus one could discuss empowerment with particular reference to blind students' opportunities in life. Thus an empowering mathematics education might open new opportunities for the individual blind students.

There is no simple way of pointing out how an inclusive education might empower different groups of students. We cannot expect to identify any straightforward interpretation of empowerment. Empowerment through inclusive education is a highly contested phenomenon.

3

The contested nature of both empowerment and inclusive education can be further explored through the notion of deficiencialism. This notion was coined by Renato Marcone (2015) in his thesis *Deficiencialismo: A Invenção da Deficiência pela Normalidade*.

Deficiencialism refers to the construction of deficiency by normality. One inspiration for this notion comes from orientalism, as presented and criticised by Edward Said (1979). Orientalism refers to the conception of the East by the West and for the West. Orientalism was formed during centuries; it accompanied the brutal processes of colonisation, and got a principal expression through the world views that accompanied the formation of the British Empire. The crucial point of orientalism is that the people from the East are inferior compared to the people from the West. In particular, the people from the East are missing the capacity of self-government. As a consequence, it becomes a noble thing that the British Empire assumes the responsibility to govern these people, who are much better off being ruled by the British than let alone to their own poor destiny. Thus orientalism served, together with racism, as an ideological justification of the brutality of colonisation.

Deficiencialism nominates some groups as suffering a deficiency, and it provides conceptions of what this group is able to do and not to do. In case of blindness the situation, however, might appear all too obvious: there are a lot of things a blind person apparently cannot do like driving a car, becoming an accountant, and mastering mathematics. Let us, however, observe that implications of suffering impairments are ever changing, in particular due to technology, and today we find a huge amount of technological devices that modifies the implication of visual impairment. Ronald Vargas Brenes (2012) talks about the social construction of blindness, and in this way he emphasises that what we can or cannot do is not equated with a simple biological fact, but with a social construction that can be ever reconstructed. What blind people can and cannot do is an open issue that cannot be expressed through any deficiencialism.

With respect to blindness, one particular feature of deficiencialism concerns mathematics. It has been broadly assumed that mathematics, and in particular more advanced studies in mathematics, is not for blind students (Marcone, 2015). However, this version of deficiencialism can also be challenged and deconstructed.

Challenging deficiencialism brings us to challenge the very notion of deficiency. Although deficiency might be used without assuming the full scope of deficiencialism, it is important to

consider if the notion, anyway, could be substituted by the notion of difference. Thus differences make part of the universal human condition, and differences can be expected in all spheres of life. Thus Fanon's observations concern differences that in the colonial order became expressed in terms of inferiority and superiority.

Challenging deficiencialism brings about an important observation with respect to inclusive education: it has to do with addressing differences. It could be differences in terms of age or ability. One can think of any kind of differences, also with respect to vision. If we see differences as a general human condition, it becomes possible think of inclusion education in terms of meetings. Blind students' access to mathematics has to do with the construction of proper learning environments, and one feature of such an environment has to do with possibilities for interaction. Thus Lessandra Marcelly (2015) shows how it is possible to construct teaching-learning material that can be used by both blind and visual students. In this way a mathematics education for blind students need not be an education for only blind students. It can instead be constructed as a feature of an inclusive education.

Let me emphasise: If we do not think in terms of "deficiencies" but in terms of "differences", one might think of an inclusive education as a form of meeting. Nobody is going to be brought into "normality". Instead inclusive education comes to refer to new forms of providing meetings among differences.

4

Jean-François Lyotard has emphasised: "The movement towards postmodernity is described as a transition in the attitude towards meta-narratives. In modernity meta-narratives were used to legitimise actions, whereas postmodernity is defined as a way of thinking where meta-narratives are rejected or 'tranquilated'." (Lyotard, 1984, p. 18) Thus, according to Lyotard, the postmodern condition is characterised by a "tranquilisation" or maybe rather a decomposition of the modern meta-narratives. One implication of this decomposition of the grand narratives is that notions, like democracy and social justice for instance, cannot be assumed to maintain any well-defined meaning. Instead such notions come to operate as contested concepts.

I do not follow postmodernism dogmatism in its many ramifications. I am, however, interested in Lyotard's use of Wittgenstein in pointing out the plurality of possible perspectives and the difficulty in nominating one perspective as being the principle one. Lyotard's formulations are deeply inspired by Wittgenstein's notion of language games. Thus the

decomposition of grand meta-narratives draws in Wittgenstein's rejection of any unified conception of language and his recognition of a variety of language games.

This decomposition also applies to the notions of inclusion and empowerment. We should not expect the existence of any well-defined meaning of such notions. They do not get any well-defined meaning by operating in some meta-narratives. Instead we should be ready to assume that such notions might be missing a solid kernel; that they can operate in different language games; and that they might comprise a variety of meanings. We should also be ready to consider possible decompositions of expressions like "reading and writing the world with mathematics". When leaving the outlook of modernity, one might come to operate in an open landscape of contested concepts.

This means that when we discuss inclusive education and related issues, we have to acknowledge the contested nature of the principal notions we are applying. There is no solid conceptual platform upon which we can address inclusive education.

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