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Grasping the Concept of Inclusive School in Slovakia and England – Q Study

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to identify how education actors of two historically and culturally different countries – Slovakia and England – thought about the concept 'inclusive school'. The Q-methodology was used for this purpose, yielding 7 descriptions of inclusive school. The results indicated two facts: 1) there is a jointly shared semantic field that can be interpreted as a consequence of globalization trends in education, and 2) perceptions of inclusive education are influenced by the history of educational systems in the countries studied. Research findings confirm that despite a certain convergence trend, a local discourse still remains the crucial determining factor of the conceptual grasp of this issue.

Key words: *inclusive school, inclusive education, Q-methodology*

Introduction

A quarter of a century has already passed from the time when the World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca took place (UNESCO 1994). In the summing up session the following conclusions were drawn: "regular schools

with inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all [...]“ (UNESCO 1994, 10). Equity and inclusion became the foundations for quality education (UNESCO 2015). Many countries have committed themselves to address all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities and inequalities in access, participation, and learning processes and outcomes (Ainscow 2020).

Although the goals to be targeted by education policies are defined in several international documents, there are differences in the countries' starting positions. Various approaches to the ideas of inclusion can be observed in the international context (Ainscow, C ezar 2006). This is confirmed by several comparative studies (e. g. Savolainen et al, 2012, Moberg et al, 2019). The conceptual analysis by G ransson and Nilholm (2014) shows four qualitatively different categories of definitions of inclusive education (G ransson, Nilholm 2014).

Also, it appears there is a danger in transplanting „selected elements of policy texts from one socio-cultural historical context to another” (Jones, Symeonidou 2017, 775). Thus, if the political discourse on inclusive education is to move forward to the educational practice in this or that country, first the educational definition of the concept 'inclusion' must be made on its ground. Without such an educational definition, the concept 'inclusion' may become a pure political slogan without effect (see Thomas, Loxley 2001). This is because differences in the concept of inclusive education can also be observed within countries – for example between or within professional groups (Arhiri, 2014; Kruse, Dederling, 2017; Sabo, et al., 2018; Olsson et al., 2019).

The awareness of the lack of uniformity in the concept 'inclusive education', and the dependence of its definition on the local context has led us to the intention to examine how education actors (teachers, school head masters, teaching assistants, various specialists) working in different cultural contexts – in the English and Slovak education systems – think about inclusion. Causes of the differences have been assessed in the context of the historical development of the education systems of both countries.

Methodology

To map perceptions about the concept of 'inclusive school' the Q-methodology was applied. It incorporates quantitative analysis of data with a qualitative interpretive framework, thus being one of few mixed methodological approaches

(Stenner, Stainton, 2004). Each participant expressed his or her point of view by sorting a set of statements. Next, inverted factor analyses based on the correlations between the persons were used to identify shared systems of beliefs. The possibility to reveal preferential opinion systems that could not be otherwise expressed by participants is considered a particular strength of the Q-methodology (Baker et al, 2010).

Compilation of the Q-set and creation of the quasi-normal distribution matrix

To design the Q-set, statements were gathered through on-line forms where education actors from both countries completed any number of unfinished sentences of the wording: „Inclusive school is school which/where...”. Other sources, in accordance with recommendations of Watts and Stenner (2005) included articles in relevant publications and websites. The obtained statements were reduced and stylized by four assessors independently of each other and in several phases, so that they: (1) included only one thought; (2) meanings were not repeated; (3) plain language was used; (4) statements had a sufficient differentiating value. In the end, a set of 57 items was compiled, for which the quasi-normal distribution matrix was created. The scale range (11 points) and its slope were chosen according to the recommendations for 40 to 60-item Q-sets (Watts, Stenner, 2012) – Figure 1.

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5
?	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	?
?	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	?
(2)	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	(2)
	(3)	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	?	
		(4)	?	?	?	?	?	?	(4)	
			?	?	?	?	?	?		
			(6)	?	?	?	?	?	(6)	
				?	?	?	?	?		
				(8)	?	?	?	?	(8)	
					?	?	?	?		
					?	?	?	?		
					(11)					

Figure 1. Fixed matrix of a quasi-normal distribution

The upper line is the reference scale for statements differentiation (- 5 – the statement describes me the least, 0 – a vague statement (neither, nor); 5 – the statement describes me the best). Each position on the scale could be placed the number of statements given in the brackets.

Selection of participants and data collection procedure

The sample consisted of 52 education actors – 21 from England and 31 from Slovakia. Since the research aimed at examination of subjectivity, the sample was built to include the assumption of differentiation in views of the topic under examination (Lukšík, 2013). Also, the size of the sample was influenced by the statistical analysis used (its inverse character) requiring that the number of participants was smaller than the number of items (Stenner, Stainton, 2004). Table 1 presents the overview of participants' characteristics. Data were collected online via the server Q-assessor.com (© The Epimetrics Group, LLC, 2010-21). In the first step, participants sorted items into three categories – statements I identify with; statements I do not identify with; vague statements. In the second step, the sorting continued on a more sensitive 11-points scale. In the end, participants filled in a questionnaire aimed to find out supplementary characteristics.

Table 1. Participants' characteristics

Age*	6 (20-30 years old) 12 (30-40 years old) 21 (40-50) 9 (50 + years old)
Gender	2 (man), 50 (woman)
Education*	10 (SE), 7 (HE – 1st level), 24 (HE – 2nd level), 7 (HE – 3rd level)
Profession*	25 (teacher), 1 (HE teacher), 3 (psychologist) 2 (school psychologist), 4 (special pedagogue), 1 (teaching assistant), 11 (other) 2 (not given)
Type of school*	18 (kindergarten), 20 (elementary school), 3 (secondary school), 8 (other school)
Position *	9 (head master), 24 (teacher), 3 (teaching assistant), 13 (other professional employee)
Length of experience at school *	11 (0-5 years), 8 (5-10 years), 12 (10-15 years), 7 (15-20 years), 4 (20-25 years), 7 (25 + years)
Experience with the disabled *	3 (in the family), 5 (at school), 41 (without noticeable experience)

* Marked characteristics were obtained incomplete data from participants

Results

Data were statistically analysed by the program Q-assessor (© The Epimetrics Group, LLC, 2010-13). 7 factors (rotated by the orthogonal varimax procedure) were identified, in sum explaining 47.5% of the total variance (result above 35% can be considered valuable – Watts, Stenner, 2012), and including 30 participants. The criterion for including persons into factors was the loading coefficient value

higher than 0.40 and the Fuertratt criterion taking into account both the loading coefficient and the communality value (similarity with other participants). Of the remaining 22 participants, 7 participants loaded significantly more than one factor. 9 participants loaded one of the factors above the set level of significance, however, after application of the Fuertratt criterion, they were not included in the factors.

Only factors with eigenvalues higher than 1 were described. The condition was fulfilled by all factors. The factor G appeared to be bipolar and it was significantly loaded by only two participants. Since it was one positive and one negative correlation on the basis of which factor descriptions would have been made (minimum number), it was decided to exclude that factor. In the description phase, maps of meanings of the factors were created. They were based on items with their placement in a given factor considerably different from their placement in other factors. Next, the context of meanings was looked for between strong statements in the factor (item placed in extreme positions). This interpretation could be called the “bottom-up” procedure, since it was a heuristic search for the connection between individual statements and their naming (Lukšík, 2013). Table 2 presents the description of the factors and the overview of participants’ characteristics more significantly connected with the factors.

Table 2. Description of the factors

Factor A: Inclusive school as a response to social demand	
10.96% of variance, eigenvalue of 5.70; description based on 5 people – 2 from England, 3 from Slovakia; average age 42.8 years; characteristics: (gender) women, (education) HE 2nd level or secondary school, most women worked at elementary schools. The factor included 1 teacher, 2 teaching assistants, a headmistress, and other educational professional employee. The length of experience was very diverse, covering all categories. Personal experience with a disabled person was reported by 1 respondent.	
Description	School that sees inclusion as the demand of society. It assumes responsibility for fulfilment of its social role. Since it respects the integration trend, it formally includes also children with various needs. In accordance with the current discourse, it forms support teams and works closely with external educational, counselling, social and health organizations.
Factor B: Inclusive school as a family school sensitive to the needs of the child	
4.26 % of variance, eigenvalue of 2,21; description based on 4 people – all coming from England; average age 36.75 years; characteristics: (gender) women, kindergarten teachers, (education) prevailing HE. The length of experience at school was mostly 0 to 5 years (3 people), in 1 case 10 to 15 years; no personal experience with the disabled.	

Description	Multicultural school where the child's needs are the centre of attention. It applies a kind of a parental principle of accepting the child as the child is, regardless of the child's characteristic. Therefore, children's satisfaction, feeling of acceptance and personal success are in the first place. It does not forget satisfaction of parents and their need to be proud of their child. Teaching is differentiated. Teacher do not follow the principles of inclusive education superficially, but they implement inclusive education due to their interest in the child and sensitivity to the child's needs.
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Factor C: Inclusive school as a product of its employees' initiative and autonomy

6.04% of variance, eigenvalue of 3.14; description based on 3 people – 1 from England and 2 from Slovakia; average age 48 years; characteristics: (gender) 2 women and 1 man, (education) HE 2nd and 3rd level prevailed; all teachers. The length of practice varied: one woman 10 to 15 years, other one 25+. The man's length of experience was 15 to 20 years. One participant had experience with a disabled person in the family.

Description	School managed by an innovative, flexible, motivating and inspiring headmaster who creates a favourable climate at work and supports free decision-making and self-realization of his employees. These, aware of their own power, make effort to improve processes and move forward. Teachers' formal education is not decisive, nor is the time they spend at school. Motivation and the real ability to do things as good as possible are the key. The spirit of solidarity uniting the school staff is present also in teaching. Change in this school results from bottom-up pressure.
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Factor D: Inclusive school as an implementer, executor of integration

3.98% of variance, eigenvalue of 2.07; description based on 3 people – all from Slovakia; average age 44.7 years; characteristics: (gender) women, (education) HE 2nd level. Two teachers worked at kindergarten. The length of experience: 2 participants 15-20 years, 1 participant 25+. Two had experience with the disabled.

Description	School that follows the current trend of introducing principles of inclusive education. It understands integration as an important social challenge it must respond to. It makes effort to come closer to the vision. It has high demands on teachers and puts pressure on them to integrate children. It prepares individual educational plans for SEN children. It addresses mainly the issue of integration of Roma children as well as children with disabilities. In order to manage integration, it employs various specialists (inclusive teams).
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Factor E: Inclusive school as a concept of school centred on individualization

13.7% of variance, eigenvalue of 7.12; description based on 8 people – 3 coming from Slovakia and 5 from England; average age 40 years; characteristics: 1 man, HE 2nd level, elementary school headmaster, experience of more than 25 years. The other women had mostly HE of the 2nd and 3rd level. 4 of them had working experience from 0 to 5 years, 2 of them from 5 to 10 and 1 from 15 to 20 years. Only 1 participant had personal experience with a disabled pupil.

Description	It is a school with internalized principles of inclusion. It implements inclusive education without realizing doing so. That is why it does not openly subscribe to them; it does not present itself as an inclusive school. It naturally responds to the needs of each child and sets up all processes accordingly, does not tend to compare them with the general standard. On the contrary, it is focused on the strengths of each child; it is sensitive to the child's limits. It chooses goals, methods and strategies based on the knowledge of each child's individuality.
Factor F: Inclusive school as an institution with a clear vision and strong leader	
5.3% of variance, eigenvalue of 2.8; description based on 2 people – both coming from England; average age 50.5 years; characteristics: (gender) women, teachers by professions; length of experience 10 to 5 years and 25+ years. No experience with the disabled.	
Description	School with an energetic and dynamic leader. He is demanding and has a clear idea of how the school should function. He is a pro-inclusive thinking leader, leading his employees in this spirit. The employees follow him and make effort to set the school processes for each child to be successful. Teachers are well paid and appreciated for their hard work. The school leader sees problems as a challenge which he always manages to respond to. He is open to cooperation with other schools and institutions. The school functions on the basis of consistent planning and self-evaluation

Discussion

As mentioned above, the individual descriptions of inclusive schools are connected with various characteristics of participants. In terms with our intent, participants' country affiliation is of the key importance, which is basically demonstrated in all six identified factors that complied with the extraction rule. Based on the given intent, three categories are created from them. The first category includes the factors A, C, E characterized by being formed by respondents from both countries. They may express a certain convergence of school education systems in the two countries. The second category includes the factors B and F, loaded by respondents from England. The third category includes the factor D with respondents only from Slovakia. The second and third category express convergence limits of these two school educational systems, at least in relation to the issue under examination. The results point to two facts.

The first fact is that despite the cultural and historical differences of the countries, there is a shared semantic field (factors A, C, E) as a result of globalization trends. Inclusive education is an international trend indicating maturity of national

education systems (UNESCO 1994, 10; UNESCO 2015). It motivates political representations of countries to adopt political decisions at least at a declarative level. It indicates that there may be a convergence of ideas about what the representative type is of the institution referred to as inclusive school.

The second fact, we point out to, is that our research confirms Göransson and Nilholm's (2014) thesis about a determining influence of historical, political and cultural specifics of a country also on formation of inclusive school perceptions. This happens despite globalization trends. While the factor B and factor F are loaded exclusively by respondents from England, the factor D, on the contrary, by respondents only from Slovakia. The influence of historical, political and cultural specifics is legible. The concept of school as a public institution developed differently in these two countries. That is why the descriptions of the factors (B and F) into which English respondents fall, are dominated by such categories as *the child and the child's needs, satisfaction, feelings of acceptance and personal success, differentiated teaching, energetic and dynamic leader, pro-inclusive thinking leader, well paid and appreciated teachers, consistent planning and self-evaluation*. On the other hand, the factor (D) formed on the basis of Slovak respondents is characterized by such categories as *following current trends, the requirement to meet indicators of pro-inclusiveness, individual education plans for SEN children, inclusive teams, pressure on teachers*. What, then, the historical development of these two countries' concept of school as a public institution differs in? We shall point out only to such differences which, in our opinion, determine the different preferences of English and Slovak respondents in their thinking about the content of the concept 'inclusive school'.

Firstly, it is the fact that since the 18th century the Slovak school system has been developed as centralized, state-controlled, considerably bureaucratic and educationally rigid. This is basically true even today. In addition, the Slovak school system has long been selective. A large part of children with special educational needs is still educated outside the mainstream. Thus Slovak respondents think about inclusive school as about "the current trend"; thus, about something that is situated outside their own professional needs, as something that has come as a requirement from outside and which they must comply with. They strive to meet the formal criteria of inclusion so that their school is assessed as a school following trends and meeting social requirements. They perceive the category of inclusion rather from the aspect of a child's psycho-medical disability thus as a deficit (Clough, Corbet 2001) to be compensated at school so that the child is able to comply with its requirements. In this case inclusion is perceived as a compensation and assimilation model of children's inclusion in the educational process.

The English school system and teachers' position in it have developed in considerably different conditions. First of all, the immediate inherence of state power (mainly in the field of curricular policy) appeared as late as in the eighties of the 20th century when the curriculum model based on the national curriculum was adopted as a manifestation of centralization. This was perceived by many English teachers as a direct infringement upon their professional autonomy (Lowe 2007) developed in English conditions since the 18th century (Gillard 2018). Autonomy became a permanent professionalization context for every succeeding generation of teachers (Gunter, Chapman 2009). English school is also much more embedded in its local context than it is in Slovakia. In such conditions, also the inclusive school culture developed in the second half of the 20th century (Booth, Ainscow 2002), perceived as an internal need and not as a trend to be met. The concept of inclusive school is an intersection of needs and expectations of the school local and professional community in the interest of its pupils' development. The rate of success of such school thus largely depends on its leader. School under the leadership of an energetic and dynamic leader forms its own vision expressing its autonomy and inner belief in the need to create an inclusive culture. The fact, that school as an institution is perceived as a formative social factor in the local context, directly affects also the social status of teachers. Although local authorities, as well as families of children lay increased demands on their work, they also respect them. We consider this to be one of the basic motivational factors of the participatory model of school management, this also in relation to the need to create an inclusive school culture.

Conclusion

The results of our research indicate that there is a universal, or better – global requirement in the field of inclusive education development, which national educational policies strive to comply with. However, this research, too, shows that a different historical, political and cultural context in which the discourse takes place in national states, still remains a crucial determining factor of the conceptual grasp of this issue.

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