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CONCEPTUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AMONG TEACHERS AND SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Abstract

The interventions and supports offered for students with special educational needs (SEN) in schools considered to be inclusive in Lebanon are not similar in nature and reflect a disparity in practices, which seems to be related to a varied conceptual representation, hence the usefulness of developing a clear conceptual framework to harmonize the interpretation of the implementation of inclusive schools. In the present research, we propose to analyze and discuss the conceptual representations of inclusive schools made by school principals and teachers in the public and/or private sector, our target population. A questionnaire was completed by 157 participants, followed by a content analysis. The results indicate that the conceptualization of inclusive education in Lebanon is far from being well defined. It is only partial and mostly reduced to a simple physical integration of SEN in schools. We emphasize confusion about the terms used to designate the fundamental dimensions of inclusive education. Clarification of the representations of professionals will promote an evolution in their conception and greater effectiveness in their educational practice.

Keywords: conceptual representations, differentiated instruction, diversity, education for all, inclusive education, school principals, teachers, SEN.

1. The Concept of “Inclusive Education”

For more than two decades, many countries have been using international recommendations (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2009, 2016) as a basis for developing their education policies and are trying to move towards a more inclusive school system.

The current discourse on education places the issue of inclusion at the heart of educational issues (Akkari & Barry, 2018). The word “inclusion” is associated with several other terms, namely “school inclusion”, “inclusive pedagogy”, “inclusive school”, “inclusive education”, the last two being frequently used as synonyms for school inclusion (Rousseau & Bergeron, 2013).

Fundamentally, the concept of inclusive education is based on “an ethical principle giving every child the unconditional right to attend ordinary school on an equal basis with others” (Noël, 2019, p. 227)³. “Inclusive education is based on the principle that everyone has the right to accede quality education that meets the basic learning needs of learners and that their life. It strives to develop the potential of everyone. It is about taking into account all learners and not meeting the needs of one child at the expense of another” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], cited by Manço & Gouverneur, 2015, p. 84). It consists of “reducing all barriers in the education of all students” (Booth & Ainscow, 2002, p. 4). Inclusive education “is an approach that focuses on how to transform education systems and improve the quality of education at all levels and in all contexts, in order to adapt to the diversity of learners and to promote educational success” (cited by Le Prévost,

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³ The quotations that appear in the "Concept of Inclusive Education" part are translated from French.

2010, p. 55). This is in order to achieve a more just society and an ‘equality of opportunity’, with the goal of ending ‘indifference to differences’, following the expression attributed to Bourdieu (cited by Le Prévost, 2010, p. 55). On the other hand, international texts use the concept of inclusive education, “moving from the individual problem of including each child in an education system to a collective problem of changing that system so that all children benefit from quality education, regardless of their needs” (Reverdy, 2019, p. 1). Such education is “a process, not an end”, and results from a vision of a world based on equity, justice and impartiality (UNESCO, 2018). It breaks with the principle of inclusive education in which students with special needs were previously “perceived as visitors” (Armstrong, 2006, p. 73) required to adapt to the regular school system. It necessitates adapting the school to the diversity of students, whether or not they have a “disability”. Inclusive education then implies a twofold transformation: “schools to become communities open to all without restriction and practices, to enable learning for all in diversity” (Armstrong, 2006, p. 73). This diversity must be seen as a resource that can enrich the education of all students rather than as a problem to be solved (Lipsky & Gartner, 1989). The school's project must be part of a strong commitment to education for all students (Prud'homme & Ramel, 2016). The inclusive approach therefore deposits the simple educational ambitions of institutions and corresponds to a systemic approach to society (Gardou, 2012) that aspires to become “a society of individuals requiring the involvement of everyone in the collective well-being and the incorporation of all in the various dimensions that underpin it” (Ebersold, 2009, p. 73).

The actors of the educational community, like the rest of society, are culturally heterogeneous and socially unequal. However, the functioning of the school and the models it disseminates are monolithic, in most cases, representing only part of society or often being closer to each other's standards than to those of others (Manço & Gouverneur, 2015). Inclusive school would therefore be “a project for the school which, through structural, organizational and pedagogical adaptations, aims to make it possible for all pupils, whatever their needs, to achieve optimal schooling in an ordinary environment” (Thomazet, Mérini, & Gaime, 2014, p. 70). “More broadly, inclusive school is the micro scale of an inclusive society, of a global investment by all for everyone” (Akkari & Barry, 2018, p. 38). Without going so far as to consider inclusion as a “utopia” (Gillig, 2006, as cited in Rousseau & Bergeron, 2013), we could conceive it “as a movement and not as a destination” (Booth & al., 2013, as cited in Rousseau & Bergeron, 2013).

Inclusive education as described is still poorly applied in school systems. In this study, we were interested in understanding the representations, concerns and practices of teachers and school principals in Lebanon that they associate with the notion of inclusive education. This concept began to be institutionalized in Lebanon with Law 220/2000, which lays down the principles and law for the participation of persons with special needs in society and stipulates that every person with disabilities has the right to education, and guarantees equal educational opportunities to all persons with disabilities, children and adults, in all educational institutions, in regular or special classes (article 59).

It is not enough to have a legal and constitutional obligation to change social representations and practices. Several dimensions are necessary for the development of inclusion in a school: developing inclusive education policies, developing inclusive education practices; and creating a culture of inclusive education that can bring about changes in both policy and practice (Booth & Ainscow, 2002, p. 9). In addition, in any approach to inclusive education, it is necessary to first clarify the basic concepts that will guide these educational policies, the functioning of structures and systems, and therefore practices. “Inclusive education has often been criticized for its lack of conceptual focus. Some observers argue that expanding this concept to include all students goes too far, making the issue too vague” (UNESCO, 2018). Bélanger, Frangieh, Graziani, Mérini and Thomazet (2018) highlight the “absence of consensus definitions” and “growing gaps in the way the issue of inclusive schooling is positioned”. Their

study shows “a virtual absence of an explicit definition of inclusive school (or integration)”. Reverdy (2019) notes that the notions of integration, inclusion and inclusive school depend largely on national contexts and on different political, societal, historical and pedagogical considerations, hence the lack of unanimity in the definition of inclusive school. However, the transition from an integrative to an inclusive model cannot take place without a clear and operational definition of the concept of inclusive education. This is a difficult and complex task, given the variations in definitions and terminology used.

We are aware that in the field of inclusive education, there are many uncertainties, disagreements and contradictions. That is why one of the objectives of this paper is to understand more clearly what is meant by this concept, which is so widely used today. Our research is therefore first and foremost descriptive and comprehensive, but also critical of the conceptual representation of teachers and school principals in the concept of inclusive education.

2. Background and Aims of the Research

Access to our research site was a crucial first step. Faced with some of the mainstreamed practices considered inclusive in Lebanon, T.I.E.S¹'s researchers were asked by the Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD) - Beirut to lead a seminar on “Inclusive education in the Lebanese education system” in six regional centers of CERD: Baalbeck, Sin El Fil, Saida, Tripoli, Aley and Jounieh. They were addressed to the school principals and teachers.

The objectives of the seminar were to:

- clarify concepts and principles related to inclusive education;
- analyse the legal and regulatory framework related to inclusive education;
- present the transition from separate to inclusive education;
- develop an understanding of the challenges of inclusive practice.

Since one of the objectives of T.I.E.S is to conduct research related to inclusive education, we submitted a questionnaire for participants² before conducting the seminar in order to identify and assess practices and equity in the Lebanese school.

This article is part of an ongoing research project that is looking more broadly on “Understanding equitable and inclusive education in Lebanon”. This analysis focuses on some of the results, especially those related to the conceptual representations of professionals in inclusive education schools.

2.1. Research Tools

Although the research focus is primarily comprehensive and descriptive, “research can enrich the prescriptive enterprise and indirectly contribute to the renewal of practices” (Crahay, 2002, p. 257). It is on this basis that we developed the questionnaire.

The content is organized into three main sections: concepts, practices and equity. It deals with different points related to inclusive education: the meaning of inclusive education, the key ingredients of inclusive education system, the challenges and difficulties faced when working with students with additional support needs, as well as the challenges for providing equity in education.

The questionnaire provides both qualitative and quantitative data. The different types of data collected provide representations of different points of view on inclusive education and equity and come from different professionals in various roles in the Lebanese school.

¹ Together for Inclusive Educational Systems, is a non-profit, non-governmental organization active in the field of inclusive education (<http://ties-education.org/>)

²Further to the participants' request, the questionnaire was not distributed at CERD-Jounieh.

2.2. The Participants

The sampling was designed according to the participants who attended the above-mentioned seminar (n=267). We collected a total of 196 replies (73.4%). Table 1 shows the number of participants sampled by occupation/profession.

Table 1

Number of Participants and their Positions within the Education System

Current position	N	%
School principal	37	18.9
Teacher	119	60.7
Teacher trainer	3	1.5
Special educator	6	3.1
Supervisor	13	6.6
2 positions¹	8	4.1
Other²	10	5.1
Total	196	100

Basically, the training was intended for principals and teachers, the other participants attended on an informal level, the reason why we selected for this study the questionnaires completed by teachers and principals. A total of 157 have been analyzed. The table below presents the personal data of the sample.

¹This category includes teachers who have another position in the school (e. g. support teacher, special educator, coordinator, supervisor, etc.).

²In this category, we group the functions that do not fit into the previous categories, such as librarian, guidance counsellor, health counsellor, teacher training school principal, etc.

Table 2*Personal Data of the Survey*

Sample	Categories	N	%
Age	21-30	26	16.6
	31-40	52	33.1
	41-50	46	29.3
	51-64	33	21.0
Gender	Male	16	10.2
	Female	141	89.8
Degree	Secondary	17	10.8
	Vocational education (BT – TS)	8	5.1
	BA	103	65.6
	Master	24	15.3
	PhD	1	0.6
	Other	3	1.9
	No answer	1	0.6
Position	Principal	37	23.6
	Teacher	120	76.4
Work place (Sector)	Public	140	89.2
	Private	15	9.6
	Both	2	1.3
CERD centers regional	Baalbeck	21	13.4
	Beirut	27	17.2
	Aley	42	26.8
	Saida	39	24.8
	Tripoli	28	17.8
Total		157	100

Our sample includes principals and teachers, most of them female (89.8%). 62.4% of the participants range between the age of 31 and 50; 81.5% have a university degree. They work primarily in the public sector, in 5 regional centers of the CERD in Lebanon.

Table 3*Years of Experience in the Educational Field*

		Current position				Total	
		School principal		Teacher			
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Years of teaching experience	≤ 3	1	0.6	14	8.9	15	9.6
	< 3-5 >	0	0.0	14	8.9	14	8.9
	< 5-10 >	0	0.0	14	8.9	14	8.9
	>						
	≥ 10	36	22.9	77	49.0	113	72.0
	No answer	0	0.0	1	0.6	1	0.6
Total		37	23.6	120	76.4	157	100

Most of the participants have professional experience of more than 10 years (72%), of which 22.9% of principals and 49% of teachers.

Table 4*Years of Experience in Inclusion*

		Current position				Total	
		School principal		Teacher			
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Years of experience in inclusion	≤ 3	7	4.5	49	31.2	56	35.7
	< 3-5 >	2	1.3	4	2.5	6	3.8
	< 5-10 >	2	1.3	4	2.5	6	3.8
	≥ 10	4	2.5	3	1.9	7	4.5
	No experience	22	14.0	60	38.2	82	52.2
Total		37	23.6	120	76.4	157	100

52.2% of the participants have no experience in the field of inclusion, of which 14% are principals compared to 38.2% of teachers. Whereas 35.7% have less than 3 years experience in inclusion, including 31.2% of teachers.

3. Results*3.1. Definition of Inclusive Education from Principals and Teachers' Point of View*

The first open question item in our questionnaire was to define inclusive education. Further to the content analysis, the responses of the subjects of the sample (principals and teachers) were distributed according to the themes covered; 23 themes were identified. A second selection grouped the categories and limited them to eight: collaboration, education for all, integration with peers, diversity, differentiated instruction, social integration, varied responses not related to any category, and no response. Many definitions seemed confusing, not clear, having used concepts independently of a deep understanding of their meaning, sometimes even containing syntactic errors, making them incomprehensible. In this case, the classification in the various categories was based on the keywords used by the participants. Responses are as follows:

Table 5*Distribution of Thematic Categories in the Responses*

Categories	N	%
Collaboration	6	2.7
Education for all	43	19.1
Integration with peers	99	44
Diversity	27	12
Differentiated instruction	29	12.9
Social integration	9	4
Other	2	0.9
NR	10	4.4
Total responses¹	225	100

The table above highlights in particular four categories of definitions: inclusive education consists first of integrating all students with special educational needs (SEN) with their peers in regular schools (44%), ensuring them an education for all (19.1%) and, above all, accepting their diversity (12%) by using differentiated instruction (12.9%).

3.2. *Integration with Peers*

In this research, the word “integration” (دمج in Arabic) appears in 83% of the responses in this category (n=99). They are oriented towards the integration of SEN with their peers. The words used to refer to SEN are quite varied: “special needs”, “different needs”, “special cases”, “case that need special care”, “the student suffering from a particular problem” “student suffering from a specific problem”, “abnormal”, “learning difficulties” “mental disabilities, physical disabilities, different disabilities, deaf and blind, paralyzed”, “developmental difficulties”, “abnormal student”, “solid will”, “those who have iron will”, “behavioural disorder”, “children with difficulties”, “students with special educational needs”.

The words used for the other students are “ordinary child”, “normal and healthy students”, “students not suffering any learning problem”, “normal”², “equal”, “normal categories”, “other pupils”, “other learners”.

The schooling of the students mentioned above is carried out in the following places: “same class”, “one center, “one regular class”, “one normal school”, “one building”, “one environment”, “one institution”, “the schools”.

To conclude on the above, inclusive education is then synonymous to integrating students with SEN in regular classes with other students: “Inclusive education is about unifying the place of study for all students so that they are together in the same classes...”, and this “in a single school”, “in an environment adapted for all”, which can accommodate “several cases in one class”. It is also “an education based on the abilities and skills of children or learners with special needs, in order to integrate them with other learners”; it is “working to help them”, in particular “to integrate them into the education system”. It “means to bring together and accommodate a particular student who has a problem with the other student in general”. This integration in the school system would be “educational, pedagogical and social”.

¹ One definition can be classified into several categories.

²The verbatim were translated from Arabic. Some of them are not clear in Arabic and contain syntax errors, we were faithful to the original sentence in the translated version. That is why some translated ideas are not very comprehensible.

3.3. Education for all

This category includes responses related to Education for All, with three key words frequently repeated in the definitions. The first one is the right to education (n=9) “every child has the right to be a pupil in a place and program appropriate to his or her mental and physical abilities”; “every individual has the right to learn, regardless of his or her abilities and skills”, “the right of the student to learn and acquire skills within his or her physical, mental, social and psychological capacities”.

The second key word is the equity (n=17) “disseminate the concept of equity in education”, “equity between ordinary learners and people with special needs and learning disabilities”, “integrating learners according to their differences and their various levels”, “inclusive education means equity between the average child and children with special needs, and through inclusive education we can develop the child's capacities to be equal to the ordinary child”.

The third one is the equality (n=7) “equality among students”, “inclusive education is equality for all learners”, “consideration of individual differences and adoption of the principle of equal treatment”, “inclusive education means equality between the average child and children with special needs”. It seems important to note that the three key words are used without making clear the difference between them.

This category covers responses relating to the right to education for all without discrimination, as well as the notions of equity and equality among students.

3.4. Diversity

At this level 12% of the responses imply the concept of diversity. Inclusive education is seen as the acceptance of the other person who is different within the school, while eliminating the discrimination, marginalization and exclusion manifested towards SEN students. The 'other' is thus recognized in his or her difference. Difference is not “something shameful and society needs to understand and accept the different cases”. It is therefore a matter of “implementing the concept of acceptance of the other by the community and helping him or her”, “without any discrimination”. The aim is to “eliminate differences and disparities between students and to accept their difference”. This implies “the presence of different levels within the classroom”, as well as cases of pupils with very special needs. This inclusive education is “a holistic educational approach that ensures the non-exclusion of children, especially children with disabilities, and to change misconceptions about them”, such as “to consider them to be inferior or as a failing and marginalized part of society”.

3.5. Differentiated Instruction/Pedagogy

This category emphasizes the importance of providing an education for all adapted to SEN students. The responses cover several aspects (12.9%): the programs and curricula, tools, methods, sources or other means of support that the teacher can use to reduce inter individual differences and meet the needs of students.

This education is defined as “a sound policy that works to place the learner (with special needs) at the center of the educational circle and to provide for the modification of certain programs for the benefit of the learner”. The curriculum would then be “adapted to a welcoming and supportive environment of the problem of inclusion”.

In other words, “it is a learning process that follows a differentiated curriculum”, with students “of different levels present in a single class”, and which would be “commensurate with their mental and physical abilities”. It takes into account “individual differences”, as well as “their diverse needs”. It involves “the use of new teaching methods to ensure that all students understand the idea in a variety of ways (auditory, visual or motor)”. It also plans to select and simplify the tools to adapt them to the different abilities of the students.

3.6. Collaboration

Despite the importance of collaboration in the implementation of inclusive education, it appears in only 2.7% of the responses. This requires collaboration between specialists “for helping the teaching staff”, parents, teachers, “normal” and SEN students. It is a collaboration between “all parties involved - programs adapted to all special needs”.

3.7. Social Integration

At this level, inclusive education goes beyond the school framework (3.98% of responses). It is seen as synonymous with “integration of specific cases into society without discrimination”. It allows “the other person to lead his or her school and later professional life naturally”. It is a “social integration”, an “integration, even if minimal, in order to achieve the construction of a personality”, “adequate and effective in society”. It also represents “the right to exercise a profession”. Rehabilitation and integration into society motivate thus the individual to become “a productive, efficient and effective member with a role at the social level”.

4. Discussion

The fact that inclusive schooling appears to be the subject of an apparent societal consensus and no longer gives rise to a lively political debate (Baudot, Borelle, & Revillard, 2013) could suggest that there is agreement on the definitions underlying the issue under consideration. The results of our research as well as a reading of recent scientific literature shows that this is not the case, and the lack of common definitions has been identified as a problem, promoting ideologies and hindering the development of scientific work (Bélanger, Frangieh, Graziani, Mérini, & Thomazet, 2018). The usefulness of conceptual knowledge has been noted in several research studies, such as that of Piasta, Connor, Fishman, & Morrison (2009). Theoretical knowledge will complement the know-how of teachers and school principals. However, in order to implement inclusive education, it is important to rely on a set of elements that allow the concepts concerned to be developed. Conceptualization is inseparable from putting it into words; hence our objective through this research is to elucidate the representations of inclusive education to teachers and school principals in Lebanon.

The definitions put forward by the participants regarding inclusive education reflect a partial conceptual approach based rather on the academic integration of learners, designated by a set of terms focused on individual impairments (students with academic difficulties, behavioral problems, physical, mental, sensory disabilities, etc.). Moreover, they do not address systems that include students with SEN. However, limiting inclusion to a simple social integration of learners with special needs into mainstream schools reflects a vision that is nevertheless too simplistic. It is still far from being that of an inclusive school which “ensures in its objectives the educational inclusion of all children, without any discrimination, offers the same opportunities to all and takes into account the diversity of pupils” (Akkary & Barry, 2018, p. 37), and which advocates, still in principal, more radically the conditions of access to teaching and learning in the ordinary classroom (Pelgrims, 2016). It is the process by which “all students with special educational needs are educated together with their peers of the same age in regular classes, while receiving the special pedagogical measures they need” (Pelgrims, 2016, p. 11). Implementing an inclusive school involves assessing the special educational needs of students and allocating the measures or implementing the teaching strategies and pedagogical and didactic conditions capable of meeting those needs (Pelgrims, 2016). It aims to provide quality education for all learners.

In order to achieve an inclusive school, support is needed from the entire community: from decision-makers to end-users (learners and their families). Another point that caught our attention during the analysis of responses is that basic concepts such as diversity, equality, equity, non-discrimination, justice, special educational needs, etc., are used but they do not

seem to reflect a comprehensive conceptual approach, and may be used independently of a clear definition of their content. However, the concept of equity in education goes beyond that of equality of opportunity; it moves away from equal treatment to differentiated treatment, aimed at redressing inequalities unfairly affecting certain students or other members of the educational community with a view to achieving real equality (Larochelle-Audet, Magnan, Doré, Potvin, St-Vincent, Gélinas-Proulx, & Amboulé-Abath, 2020, p. 6). The Lebanese education system is most often part of a simple equality, where the curriculum is not adapted for students who need it. This principle is also often applied in SEN student assessments, under the pretext that the teacher must not give them favors at the expense of their peers. The consequence is that the ratio of SEN learners who drop out is higher (Frangieh & Ramel, 2019).

As for the concept of diversity, it is not used as such by the participants. Rather, the terms included in the proposed definitions are acceptance of others and differences, non-discrimination, and non-exclusion. However, the notions of “heterogeneity” and “diversity” are very often present and even fundamental in the literature promoting differentiated pedagogy (Le Prévost, 2010). The latter is retained by teachers and principals as an inevitable intermediary for adapting to inter-individual differences and to the various educational needs of pupils integrated into regular classrooms. Pedagogical differentiation thus provides situations that are sufficiently flexible and varied to enable all students to progress, and at the same time it stimulates the creation of “a climate of interdependence and inter-comprehension in which it becomes legitimate to recognize, value and take advantage of diversity in order to learn” (Prud’homme, Leblanc, Paré, Fillion, & Chapdelaine, 2015, p. 76).

Diversity is recognized “as ‘natural’ in any group of learners and inclusive education can be seen as a means of raising achievement through the presence (access to education), participation (quality of the learning experience) and achievement (learning processes and outcomes) of all learners” (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2014, p. 11). This diversity should be thought of as a resource that can enhance the education of all students rather than as a problem to be solved (Lipsky & Gartner, 1989). In order to respond to the heterogeneity of groups of students, the school advocates differentiated pedagogy as a means of combating academic failure and meeting the special educational needs of all (Pelgrims, 2016).

The aspect least raised by the principals and teachers interviewed in their definition of an inclusive school is collaboration. The success of creating inclusive education as a key to establishing inclusive societies depends on agreement among all relevant partners on a common vision supported by a number of specific steps to be taken to put this vision into practice. The move towards inclusion is a gradual one that should be based on clearly articulated principles that address system-wide development and multisectoral approaches involving all levels of society. The barriers to inclusion can be reduced through active collaboration between policy-makers, education personnel and other stakeholders, including the active involvement of members of the local community, such as political and religious leaders, local education officials and the media (UNESCO, 2009, p. 14). In this research, the responses focus on the question of the inclusion of pupils with SEN in regular school classes, without however identifying effective practices to facilitate their inclusion in schools (Giroux, 2013), or the ambition to think about the principles likely to guide action towards an ideally inclusive school (Gardou, 2014).

5. Conclusion

This study thus attempted to explore the conceptual representations of inclusive education used by teachers and school principals. The results indicate that they have a great deal of knowledge in line with the theoretical ones, but they represent only part of it and they sometimes contradict each other. This lack of a consensus definition leads to misunderstandings about the very idea of an inclusive education and more specifically an inclusive school, both in

terms of practices and the analysis of phenomena (Bélanger & al., 2018). In order to enhance this knowledge, training on concepts related to inclusive education seems to us to be an effective way to achieve this goal. Training mobilizes the entire scope of knowledge and enables the professionals concerned to gain a good grasp of the fundamental notions in order to be able to implement specific approaches. Finally, it seems important to highlight the need for research in the educational sciences, thus contributing to a deeper reflection on teachers' professional practices and their relationship to underlying conceptual representations. This promotes the creation of conditions conducive to the success of an inclusive education project.

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