



 Research Article

THE ROLE OF AN INCLUSIVE CULTURE AS A KEY ELEMENT IN ACHIEVING EFFECTIVE EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION

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ABSTRACT

Educational inclusion, regarded as a guiding philosophy, seeks to ensure that all children have access to education while fostering strategies that advance an inclusive society. This paper underscores the significance of inclusive pedagogy and child welfare, highlighting the role of an inclusive culture as a fundamental aspect of delivering quality educational experiences and establishing inclusive institutions. Such a culture is essential for cultivating a secure and stimulating environment where every individual is valued, serving as a foundation for the collective success of all community members. It nurtures shared inclusive values that are instilled in new staff, children, parents, guardians, and local community members. Given that inclusive culture encompasses both visible and invisible elements, as well as assumptions that may be recognized or overlooked, it plays a crucial role in facilitating participation while also addressing issues of exclusion, discrimination, and student isolation. Consequently, the exploration and enhancement of an inclusive culture within educational institutions necessitate scholarly and professional insights regarding the importance of integrating all children into the mainstream educational framework. This is an ongoing process that evolves daily within educational settings, with contributions from all individuals involved, both directly and indirectly.

KEYWORDS

Educational inclusion, inclusive culture, school, inclusive education.

INTRODUCTION



The ongoing transformations brought about by globalization have significantly influenced various aspects of society, particularly in redefining educational objectives. These transformations underscore the importance of education that fosters democracy, collaboration, tolerance, and appreciation for diversity (Kostović et al., 2011). In contemporary society, inclusion stands as a fundamental principle of a democratically oriented framework. It addresses one of the most pressing issues of our time: the marginalization of numerous individuals from the economic, social, political, and cultural spheres of their communities. The term "inclusion" has gained prominence alongside the emergence of the notion of "quality education for all." In this context, some scholars (Karagiannis, Stainback & Stainback, 2000) characterize inclusion as a philosophy rooted in the belief that all individuals possess equal rights and opportunities. Inclusive education encompasses the practice of integrating all children—irrespective of their abilities, challenges, socio-economic status, or backgrounds—into a mainstream educational system that caters to their unique needs. To enhance the quality of educational institutions, fostering an inclusive culture is a critical aspect (Booth & Anisow, 2002). The significance of examining the development of an inclusive culture highlights not only the undeniable influence of education on societal culture but also the necessity of exploring the cross-cultural characteristics of educational institutions (Denisova et al., 2019). An inclusive culture necessitates a well-defined socio-political orientation that promotes shared value systems.

These values manifest in formal documents, social initiatives, and the educational process itself. By advocating for inclusive values, the capabilities of both society and educational institutions are bolstered, facilitating constructive changes that advance the development of an inclusive culture within both schools and society at large (Ivančić & Stančić, 2013).

In academic discussions, the notion of an inclusive culture is inherently linked to the objectives of fostering an inclusive society, garnering significant interest from numerous scholars. The Right to Education and the Inclusive Social Context In the contemporary evolution of human society, one can observe a shift in the perceptions of the majority towards various individuals or social groups, particularly those with disabilities. Encouragingly, society appears to be progressing from a history marked by severe rejection and segregation, through integration, towards a state of true inclusion. The rights of children, especially those with developmental challenges, have captured the attention of the United Nations (UN) since the mid-20th century. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which asserts that every individual has the right to education, was ratified in 1948. This foundational document paved the way for a series of international declarations, conventions, and plans that operationalized fundamental rights, including those pertaining to individuals with developmental disabilities. A pivotal UN document for understanding inclusive education is the United Nations Convention on



the Rights of the Child (Hrnjica, 2007), which guarantees rights to all children without discrimination. The World Declaration on Education for All (1990) represents the first international document advocating for a transformative approach to the educational system, emphasizing the needs and nature of the child. The UN standard rules aimed at equalizing educational opportunities for children with disabilities affirm the right to education for all and advocate for education within an "integrative school environment" in the "regular school system." To effectively implement these rules, it is essential to reform the educational system and the surrounding environment to ensure they are both acceptable and accessible.

The Salamanca Declaration, adopted by the World Conference on the Education of Children with Special Needs in 1994 under the auspices of UNESCO, asserts that every child possesses distinct educational requirements and has the right to attend their local schools. It emphasizes the necessity for educational systems and programs to be designed and implemented in a manner that accommodates the diverse characteristics and needs of all children. Specifically, those with special educational needs should have access to mainstream schools that embrace them within a child-centered educational framework capable of addressing their unique requirements. Following this significant advancement in Salamanca, the World Declaration on Education for All and the Framework for Action were established in 2000 during the World Forum on Education in Dakar,

where the primary objectives of "Education for All" were articulated. The foremost goals include enhancing and expanding educational opportunities for children, particularly those from vulnerable and marginalized backgrounds; ensuring that by 2015, all children are enrolled in primary education and receive quality, free primary schooling; and guaranteeing that the educational needs of all youth and adults are met equitably. Various international documents underscore the notion that education is a fundamental right for all children, prioritizing quality education and protection against discrimination in any form, while promoting respect for diversity. These documents also highlight the importance of creating an inclusive school environment that eliminates barriers, ensuring accessibility for all children from vulnerable groups, and advocating for a flexible educational system and curriculum that adapts to the diverse educational needs of all children, thereby fostering an inclusive society.

Educators, who are the primary facilitators of this process, hold a significant and pivotal role in the implementation of the key areas outlined in international documents that advocate for inclusive education. Since 2009, the Republic of Serbia has emphasized the importance of fostering inclusion within its educational system at all levels, leading to the adoption of crucial legal and strategic frameworks. The Law on the Basics of the Education System, enacted in 2009 (Sl. Glasnik, br. 72/09), established that every child is entitled to basic education, irrespective of individual differences. This legislation gave rise to

essential regulations aimed at ensuring its practical application, including the Rulebook on detailed instructions for determining the right to an individual educational plan and the Rulebook on additional educational, health, and social support for children and students, which addressed specific areas of concern that had been identified in practice. Furthermore, the Strategy for the Development of Education in Serbia until 2020 (Education Development Strategy, 2012) serves as a vital strategic document that underscores the enhancement of educational quality in a comprehensive manner. In particular, regarding inclusive education, this document asserts that all children possess the legal right to receive quality education and upbringing, regardless of their social, economic, health, regional, national, linguistic, ethnic, religious, or other characteristics. Despite the well-established normative frameworks, the realization of the right to quality education remains unfulfilled for all students (Milošević & Maksimović, 2022). The concept of quality education is intrinsically linked to the training and empowerment of teachers, who are pivotal to all educational reforms. The extent to which teachers are equipped, trained, and made aware of inclusive practices directly influences the achievement of the objectives outlined in both international and national documents. The significance of these factors is supported by numerous studies conducted in both domestic and international contexts. Inclusion in Education can be interpreted in various ways, contingent upon the context and the stakeholders involved; however, it is fundamentally a complex

phenomenon that has become a moral imperative within educational institutions. In a broader context, inclusion encompasses the processes that enable every individual, irrespective of their experiences and life circumstances, to realize their full potential (Mišković, 2013). Key elements of an inclusive society include the reduction of inequality, enhancement of social cohesion, and a balance between individual rights and responsibilities. Within the educational framework, inclusion is understood more narrowly as a facet of an inclusive society, where children can participate and contribute regardless of their gender, abilities, ethnicity, or challenges. The core objective of an inclusive education system is to broaden access to education for every child while simultaneously fostering an environment conducive to quality education that aligns with each child's needs and capabilities. In professional literature, this child-centered approach to education, which emphasizes rights and specific needs, is referred to as inclusive education (Muškinja et al., 2011).

In academic discourse, there exists a diverse array of definitions pertaining to inclusive education, highlighting the absence of a unified consensus among scholars and a universally accepted definition of inclusion. Various authors, such as Ilić (2009), have explored the concept of inclusion from multiple perspectives, and its interpretation has evolved over time. Inclusion is fundamentally characterized by a sense of belonging rather than mere physical proximity, which was the primary focus of the earlier concept of "mainstreaming." It encompasses the



idea that children of varying abilities engage in learning, play, and work collaboratively. The success of inclusion is evident in the active participation of all children, ensuring their access to play and work environments, as well as providing them with choices. It is essential to recognize that inclusion is a process rather than a fixed location, necessitating collective responsibility from the broader social community (Inclusion Resources for Early Childhood Professionals, 1997). Stubbs (2009) articulates inclusive education as the provision of appropriate, relevant, accessible, and effective educational opportunities for all children within their communities. This educational journey commences in the family setting and encompasses both formal and informal educational initiatives within the community. According to Rouse and Florian (1996), an inclusive school is one that confronts the challenges of diversity with a collective mission focused on learning for every student. Suzić (2008) identifies three approaches to defining inclusion: as a broad concept and process, as inclusive upbringing and education, and as a compassionate approach to integrating children with special needs into mainstream schools and society. In its most comprehensive sense, inclusive education pertains to the practice of integrating all students, irrespective of their abilities, challenges, socio-economic status, or background, into regular schools and classrooms that can adequately address their individual needs (Karagiannis, Stainback & S.)

Inclusion refers to the commitment to provide optimal educational opportunities for every child within a school or classroom setting. This entails offering support services tailored to the child rather than removing the child from such services. The goal of inclusive education is to guarantee that all children within their communities have access to suitable, relevant, and effective educational experiences (Oljača & Kostović, 2014). Ensuring quality education for all necessitates the successful integration of children with developmental disabilities into the mainstream education system. This integration requires that kindergartens and schools be adapted to meet the needs of each individual, as the educational framework should be inclusive of all children. Inclusive education focuses on addressing the needs of the child within the educational process, emphasizing the adaptation of the school curriculum rather than the child themselves. This approach enables individuals with developmental disabilities to engage fully in community life, promoting tolerance and respect within the broader society, where every individual deserves recognition and acceptance as a human being. Through inclusive education, a societal philosophy emerges that upholds the principle of equal rights for all individuals, irrespective of their differences, acknowledging that such differences are a natural aspect of human existence (Cerić, 2004). Inclusion should be viewed as an ongoing endeavor to discover improved methods for addressing diversity within the contemporary educational paradigm. The effective implementation of inclusion necessitates systemic changes in programs,

methodologies, expectations, and various other elements. Both the implicit and explicit school curricula can play a significant role in fostering an inclusive school environment, influencing the overall ethos of the institution, the attitudes and beliefs of educators, the prevailing culture, and the teaching methods employed.

In contemporary educational practices, an inclusive culture is particularly prominent, emphasizing the respect for the diversity of all children within the educational framework (Education for All). According to UNESCO (2004), Education for All is a key priority in educational initiatives, targeting all children and highlighting the necessity of inclusion in educational settings (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). This approach ensures that all members of the social community have equal rights to education, irrespective of their national, religious, cultural, social, or other diverse identities (Ivančić & Stančić, 2013). The concept of an inclusive culture in this context primarily pertains to fostering a value system within the school community that embraces and supports diversity, often referred to as "inclusive values." This aspect contributes to the development of a safe and encouraging environment that promotes acceptance and collaboration, where every individual is valued, thereby laying the groundwork for the highest achievements of all community members. The inclusive evolution of a school is characterized by an ongoing process that involves consistent modifications in organizational structure, teaching methodologies, and pedagogical strategies, as well as transformations in the

professional development of educators (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). Numerous studies underscore the significance of school culture in enhancing the quality of educational practices (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Through an inclusive culture, educators can celebrate individual differences, foster democratic values, and cultivate a sense of community, cultural awareness, and mutual support among students (Smith & Barr, 2008).

The establishment of an inclusive climate and culture is essential, but the ongoing professional development of teachers is equally crucial for the effective implementation of inclusive education. The success of inclusive education largely hinges on a teacher's capacity to acknowledge the personal and social significance of students requiring additional support, as well as their commitment to ensuring the quality of the educational process (Allday et al., 2013; Milošević & Maksimović, 2022). Consequently, while the quality of teaching is vital, it represents only one aspect necessary for fostering inclusive school practices. The advancement of such practices can only occur in conjunction with the development of inclusive policies and a supportive culture, necessitating a (re)orientation towards inclusive values at the levels of the school, the educational system, and the broader social context (Ratković, Hebib & Šaljić, 2017). Given the complexity of educational institutions, the quality of school practices is influenced by various factors, including the characteristics and operational methods of the institution itself, as well as those of the educational and social systems at large.



Therefore, when evaluating the inclusivity of a school, it is imperative to consider all dimensions of inclusiveness, rather than focusing solely on the practices of the institution. The publication "Index for Inclusion" identifies three key dimensions of an inclusive school: inclusive policy, inclusive culture, and inclusive practice (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). The first two dimensions serve as a framework for development and are prerequisites for the establishment of effective inclusive practices within schools. School culture is a concept that originates from the broader idea of organizational culture, which encompasses the characteristics of an organization that influence the behaviors and actions of its members, maintain stability and order within the organization, foster commitment among its members towards achieving organizational goals, and enhance overall productivity (Hebib & Žunić Pavlović, 2018). The various components and elements that constitute school culture can be examined at multiple levels: the first level includes the visible elements of the school's structure and the processes involved in school life and operations; the second level encompasses the shared system of values and beliefs that inform the school's approach and strategies; the third level pertains to the perceptions, opinions, and emotions of those involved in school activities, which form the basis for their actions and the values they embrace (Hebib, Antonijević & Ratković, 2019). By building on the definitions of school culture and inclusive school culture, we can more precisely identify, monitor, and analyze this phenomenon through several key elements: the degree of

shared commitment among school staff towards inclusive education; the level of acceptance of the philosophy and core values of inclusive education by school personnel; the attitudes of practitioners regarding inclusive education; and the overall school climate, which reflects the environment in which educational activities occur. The quality and extent of cooperative relationships and teamwork within the school, as well as between the school, students' parents, and the local community, are crucial. This includes the degree of involvement of all stakeholders in educational and school-related activities. Effective communication is one of the most significant strategies for establishing a robust and supportive school network. It is essential to communicate efficiently, promptly, and frequently (Chen, 2019). Transparent, open, honest, and timely communication among school leaders, staff, students, families, and between students themselves is critical for fostering a positive school environment. School leadership must prioritize the development of communication channels and standards, which may involve utilizing digital platforms and applications to facilitate interactions between parents and teachers. A school that encourages feedback and dialogue creates an atmosphere where everyone feels secure, included, and empowered to express their opinions. Inclusive educational institutions offer formal avenues for staff, students, and families to provide feedback and suggestions, ensuring that their voices are acknowledged and acted upon. Changing organizational culture presents significant challenges. It is important to identify the barriers

that school systems encounter during organizational transformations.

Numerous factors contribute to the challenges faced in implementing change, including the unsuccessful outcomes of prior initiatives, insufficient funding for even basic educational requirements, and a lack of leadership in fostering cultural competence. It is crucial to have community mobilization, effective leadership, and organized community efforts (Dessel, 2010). The Teacher's Role in Advancing Inclusive Education Despite the fact that inclusion has been a focal point of international educational policy for the past thirty years and is regarded as a significant reform objective, the journey toward inclusive education is fraught with skepticism, uncertainty, and divergent viewpoints. Nevertheless, there exists robust support for inclusion and the attainment of social objectives related to education and upbringing, accompanied by a highly favorable attitude among participants in the educational process. Furthermore, it has been observed that the awareness of teachers and the enhancement of their professional competencies are outcomes of working within an inclusive setting (Begeny & Martens, 2007; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). Conversely, critics of inclusive education argue that the mainstream education system is ill-equipped to implement inclusion effectively and that achieving this goal poses considerable challenges. Tensions inevitably arise at three levels of the educational framework: the macro level concerning the overall educational system, the organizational level of individual schools, and

the personal level of individual educators (Đermanov et al., 2012). The establishment of inclusive education systems, as guided by international agreements and conventions, has introduced new responsibilities for teachers in mainstream schools. Recognizing teachers as pivotal figures in inclusive educational practices, gaining insight into their perspectives is essential for enhancing the quality of inclusive teaching. Countries aiming to enhance the quality of educational inclusion within mainstream schools, while honoring their unique social and cultural contexts, should examine teachers' perceptions of various facets of inclusive education, as well as their self-assessment of competencies for functioning in an inclusive environment (Knežević Florić et al., 2018). The effectiveness of inclusive education and the quality of inclusive practices necessitate ongoing evaluation of multiple factors. Numerous empirical studies have demonstrated the influence of teachers' professional competencies, developed during their initial training, alongside their increased willingness to engage in professional development programs tailored for inclusive classrooms. Presently, educators encounter increasingly complex demands and expectations from various stakeholders in the education sector, including parents and the growing number of students requiring inclusion. A particularly delicate aspect of inclusive education involves teaching in classrooms that accommodate children with developmental disabilities and learning challenges. Supporting the development and academic achievement of each child in most primary schools poses a

significant challenge for teachers, given the constraints of limited material, spatial, and personnel resources, the criteria for categorizing students as inclusive, the frequent absence of pedagogical assistants, and the unplanned nature of teachers' professional development. The attitudes of all participants in the educational process are crucial for the success of inclusion, with teachers' attitudes being particularly influential, as they significantly impact the effectiveness of inclusive practices within schools (Avramidis et al., 2000; Hrnjica, 2007; Suzić, 2007).

Research indicates that teachers who possess a positive outlook, along with practical experience in executing inclusive programs and formal qualifications obtained through in-service training (INSET), demonstrate significantly greater enthusiasm and preparedness for ongoing professional development. This finding underscores the importance of enhancing teacher competencies and validates the efforts that have been made thus far. As a result, it is imperative to focus on the sensitization and professional training of educators for inclusive schooling. It is well-established that the successful implementation, impact, and sustainability of inclusive practices are heavily reliant on teachers' acceptance of inclusion, as well as on the design of initial teacher education and subsequent professional development programs (Avramidis et al., 2000; Vujačić, 2005; Subban & Sharma, 2006). Discussion: The school operates within the broader societal context, and thus, its culture will inherently reflect the prevailing social values. The

school functions as a temporal culture, characterized by the specific times at which its members arrive and depart, and is spatially confined to its buildings and grounds. It serves as a platform for the negotiation and continual redefinition of shared values, assumptions, and beliefs, which are expressed and enacted collectively. To enhance the inclusivity of schools, it is essential to reflect on the fundamental values that underpin the school culture and to collaboratively investigate, negotiate, and experiment with how these values are manifested within the educational environment. While the organization of a school is shaped by broader social structures, it possesses unique emergent properties that allow it to evolve in response to its internal dynamics. Changes in school culture can occur when uncertainties in practices and policies are addressed by assertive and dedicated individuals who successfully encourage themselves and others to embrace new practices that foster transformation. Consequently, the staff has the potential to reorganize the school to better serve the needs of its students. Achieving this will necessitate effective communication, collaborative problem-solving, and mutual respect among staff members and students alike. Educators will need to transcend the limitations of conventional school structures and practices.

A contemporary educational institution necessitates a novel approach to leadership and management, characterized by the integration of changes and innovations across material, organizational, programmatic, and personnel frameworks. The practical application of inclusive

education within the school environment is a daily responsibility shared by all stakeholders involved in the educational process. The foundation of an inclusive school culture is rooted in the recognition and appreciation of diversity, which serves as a motivating factor in the work undertaken. Inclusion does not imply the homogenization of differences; rather, it emphasizes the importance of respecting individual distinctions. The significance of educational inclusion lies in facilitating the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and life competencies tailored to the unique abilities of each individual. Furthermore, developing competencies for implementing inclusion within the school setting is essential for the effective management of a modern educational institution. An inclusive culture serves as a crucial pedagogical aspect of effective educational inclusion, fostering a secure and engaging community characterized by acceptance and collaboration, where every individual is valued. This environment lays the groundwork for the optimal achievements of all members within the community. It cultivates shared inclusive values that are imparted to new staff, students, parents, and school administrators alike. The principles and values inherent in an inclusive school culture inform decision-making regarding school policies and influence daily practices within classrooms, ensuring that the development of the school is an ongoing endeavor.

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