

Inclusive Education: Perspectives on Implementation and Practice From International Experts

Jennifer A. Kurth, Amanda L. Miller, Samantha Gross Toews, James R. Thompson, Mónica Cortés, Mukunda Hari Dahal, Inés E. de Escallón, Paula Frederica Hunt, Gordon Porter, Diane Richler, Indiana Fonseca, Ruchi Singh, Jan Šiška, Rolando Jr. Villamero, and Fatma Wangare

Abstract

Every child has the right to an education, including children with disabilities. Research findings from across the globe have shown the benefits of inclusive education, and mandates for providing accessible, inclusive education can be found in national policies and international agreements as well. This article explores the perspectives of 11 international experts on the state of inclusive education in countries spanning 5 continents. Experts participated in a focus group discussion at *Inclusion International's* 17th Annual World Congress 2018 in Birmingham, United Kingdom. Participants shared multifaceted factors impacting inclusive educational practices. Based on their experiences, participants also discussed strategies that were deemed effective or ineffective depending on varied contextual elements. Implications for policy, research, and practice are discussed.

Key Words: *inclusive education; international perspectives; intellectual and developmental disabilities*

The right to receive an education exists for children and youth in many countries across the world; this right is affirmed in the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) position statement, originating in 1948 and updated in 2015. From Canada to Colombia to Comoros to Croatia, children have the opportunity to receive an education with their peers. Yet, millions of children are deprived of this right as a result of social, cultural, and economic factors (UNESCO, 2017). One factor impacting equitable access to education is the presence of a disability. Children and youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are often systematically excluded from schools altogether, and general education classrooms in particular (Aruna, 2016; Peters, 2003). A 2018 World Bank World Development report indicated, “even in countries with high overall primary school enrollments, children with disabilities are still significantly less likely to attend school” (p. 63). Children and youth with disabilities are much less likely to attend school than children without disabilities, particularly at higher grade levels (Kuper et al., 2014). For over 30 years, the United Nations

(UN), national governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), advocacy groups, and citizens across the globe have been advocating and producing legislation to support access to inclusive education for children with IDD (Inclusion International, 2017; UNESCO, 1994). This article explores the perspectives and experiences of several international experts on the state of inclusive education in countries that span five continents. Factors impacting inclusive educational practices, as well as strategies that are seen as effective and ineffective, are explored.

Defining Inclusion and Inclusive Education

Special education emerged from a medical model of disability, in which disability was viewed as a pathology and therefore a problem (Fisher & Goodley, 2007), and at a time when specialization was heralded in much of the world (Sailor, 2008-2009). As a consequence, developing means to separate students and implement specialized services was valued by many professionals (Kafle, 2014). Thus, the practice of special education today tends to reflect this process of separating students

with disabilities from the setting, activities, supports, and curriculum available to students without disabilities. Moreover, special education practices and processes have traversed geographical boundaries across national and international contexts.

However, the position that students with disabilities should be educated in general schools, with supports provided, has existed since at least the 1960s. The *principle of normalization* emerged in northern Europe (Nirje, 1969), and advocated that the patterns of life and conditions of everyday living for people with disabilities should be as close as possible to the circumstances and ways of life in the broader social community. This idea was soon applied to schools in Europe and beyond; by the 1970s, countries such as France and Canada prioritized the *integration* of students with disabilities in public schools, although separate schools remained (Thomazet, 2009). Often, however, integration was in reality *mainstreaming*, in which students with disabilities were only integrated when they were thought to be able to complete the same curriculum as their peers (Abosi, & Koay, 2008; Hotulainen & Takala, 2014). Thus, terms such as *inclusion* and *inclusive education* emerged to differentiate practices.

Inclusive education is “a process that helps overcome barriers” to presence, participation, and achievement in general education classes; inclusive education “strengthen[s] the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners” (UNESCO, 2017 p. 7). Inclusive education refers to all students, including those with identified disabilities, as well as those who have been historically marginalized, and refers to full membership in general education classes through provision of supports and services to enable youth to be successful in that place (Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013). Importantly, however, inclusion is not defined as a place; rather, it is a process and practice of designing schools to support and benefit all learners (Artiles & Kozleski, 2016). For the purpose of this article, we use the definition of inclusive education outlined in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994): “All children should learn together. . . . Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students. . . ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use, and partnerships with their communities” (p. 11-12).

Conceptual Framework

Ecological systems theory is used in this article to account for the varying contextual factors impacting students with disabilities. Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1998) explained how relationships across various interdependent social structures affect individuals, and how interactions with these systems shape student experiences and opportunities. Ecological systems theory places the student at the center and identifies the overlapping and interrelated systems that effect the individual. We use ecological systems theory to consider how micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chrono-systems influence the experiences of inclusive schooling for students with disabilities.

Student. Student characteristics reflect those that are assumed and factual, each of which can influence placement decisions (Ruppar, Allcock, & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2017). A student’s race, gender, and age are all known co-variables of student placement in inclusive versus separate settings. For example, a recent global analysis reported structural inequalities resulted in the overrepresentation of ethnic minority, immigrant, and Indigenous youth receiving special education services (Cooc & Kiru, 2018). Similarly, research in Bangladesh revealed students with intellectual disability (ID) who experience challenges in literacy were most likely to face exclusion, with only 16% of schools reporting they were prepared to support youth with disabilities (Šiška & Habib, 2013). Likewise, research from the World Health Organization indicated students with IDD across many countries, including those with high rates of school attendance, were more likely to be placed in more restrictive settings or to not attend school at all (World Health Organization, 2011). Nevertheless, broad international support exists for the practice of inclusive education when child outcomes are considered. For example, in an analysis of 280 research studies in 25 countries, Hehir and colleagues concluded, “the evidence presented. . . provides a clear message that inclusion should be the norm for students with disabilities” (2016, p. 26).

Microsystem and Mesosystem. The microsystem refers to the environments where a student immediately interacts with others on a regular basis and includes families and teachers. Teachers are greatly impacted by inclusive education, because inclusive education usually means “changing the

way things are normally done” (O’Rourke, 2015, p. 231). When teachers consider inclusive education, they tend to contemplate practical difficulties rather than the benefits to students (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Perceptions of inclusive education, then, have significant consequences on local school level implementation (Beacham & Rouse, 2012). There is growing international consensus that teachers have general dispositional support for inclusive education at the preservice (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Cameron & Cook, 2007) and inservice levels (Ahmed, Sharma, & Depeler, 2012; Dupoux, Wolman, & Estrada, 2005). However, this support is often mediated by professional expertise and experience (Çagran & Schmidt, 2011), as well as the extensiveness of students’ support needs (Haq & Mundia, 2012).

The family unit is also deeply impacted by the presence or absence of inclusive education within the mesosystem (Piškur et al., 2016). For example, Human Rights Watch (2018) found children with disabilities in Lebanon were excluded from school “due to discriminatory admission policies, lack of reasonable accommodations, lack of inclusive curricula, and discriminatory fees and expenses” (paragraph 4). Consequently, families may be required to provide necessary supports for their children that schools did not. For example, parents in India may be expected to hire “Ayahs,” or assistants, to support their child to gain physical access to schools, such as climbing stairs and using toilets (Naraian, 2013). In other instances, families themselves are expected to provide the physical and academic supports to their children while they are at school.

Exosystem. The exosystem consists of social structures, events, and processes which indirectly impact the student in their immediate environment. Teacher education and experiences are considered here (Ruppar et al., 2017). Teacher education and experiences teaching students with disabilities in general, and inclusively, vary considerably across and within nations and regions. For example, some teacher preparation at colleges and universities include coursework specifically focused on inclusive pedagogy (e.g., Spratt & Florian, 2015), whereas teachers in other situations report receiving no preservice preparation for inclusive education (e.g., Westbrook & Croft, 2015). Yet, teacher ratings of self-efficacy and attitudes about inclusive education improve, while concerns decrease, following courses related to inclusive

education (Sharma & Sokal, 2015). Similarly, motivation and previous experience with inclusive education improve teacher self-efficacy for inclusive education (Schwab, Hellmich, & Görel, 2017). And, teacher attitudes toward students with disabilities have a significant impact on student academic success and behavior (Oluremi, 2015). Together, these findings suggest significant positive impacts of preservice teacher preparation for inclusive education (Robinson, 2017).

Macrosystem. The macrosystem refers to policies, structures, cultural, and social values impacting students with disabilities and their access to inclusive education. On the policy level, the UN has been a strong proponent of every child’s right to education. Beginning with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, signatory countries have agreed to provide a free, compulsory education to all children regardless of race, gender, language, color, socioeconomic status, national origin, or birth order (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; UN General Assembly, 1948). However, it was not until The Salamanca Statement in 1994 that there was a stated urgency and necessity to provide access to education for children with disabilities (UNESCO, 1994). This commitment was solidified in 2006 with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities (UNCRPD), which asserts all signatory countries ensure an inclusive education system at all levels (UN, 2006, Article 24(1)) and further stipulates that no child should be excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability (UN, 2006, Article 24 (2)(a)). The United Nations’ Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities adopted General Comment #4 in August of 2016 to provide further guidance regarding the meaning and implications of Article 24 (Office of the High Commissioner Human Rights, OHCHR, 2018). As of June 2018, 177 countries have ratified the convention and 11 countries have signed to indicate they are considering ratification pending further review (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities, 2018). Recently, the UN *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* further asserted a commitment to inclusive education, suggesting countries “build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability, and gender sensitive” as one way to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all (UN Resolution A, 2015, (4)(a)). The 2017

UNESCO Guide to Equity and Inclusion further supports implementation of goal four of the 2030 Agenda by presenting specific guidance for integrating inclusive practice into national policy (UNESCO, 2017).

Other cultural and social values further impact children with disabilities and their access to inclusive schools, including how societal members view the etiology of disability. Causes of disability have been attributed to a range of sources, including witchcraft, family curses, and blessings and gifts from a higher power. Causes of disability have also been attributed to genetic factors, medical interventions (e.g., birth circumstances, illness; Grech, 2014), and environmental factors (e.g., war, natural disasters; Mills & Fernando, 2014). These beliefs are based on a combination of ethnocultural, economic, and personal considerations (Lamichhane, 2013) and have influences across ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

Chronosystem. The chronosystem refers to changes over time that affect a student. Numerous international policy changes, as described previously, have certainly impacted access to inclusive schools for students with disabilities. Other chronosystems impact inclusive education as well. Many countries have deep histories of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, and gender. Such practices inevitably influence on-going cultural norms and practices (Engelbrecht, 2006). The historical segregation of people with disabilities into institutions and special schools is likely a significant factor in the persistent lack of equitable inclusive schooling today (Slee, 2013). As a consequence of this, dual programs of education have emerged: special and general education. These competing systems have proved difficult to disentangle and merge into unified, inclusive systems that support all students (Naraian, 2013), and continue to serve as barriers to equitable inclusive education worldwide.

Research Purpose and Question

The purpose of this research was to gain an international perspective on the state of inclusive education (i.e., educating students with disabilities in general education classrooms alongside peers of their same age with appropriate supports). The specific goals were to understand the (1) contextual factors impacting inclusive education and (2) status

of inclusive education in represented countries, including perceived successful strategies for promoting inclusive education and existing barriers. The following research question is thus addressed: What are the opinions and experiences of particular international experts on the status of inclusive education for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the countries and/or provinces in which they work?

Method

The purpose of this study was to describe the perspectives of 11 international experts attending *Inclusion International's* 17th Annual World Congress 2018 in Birmingham, United Kingdom regarding the state of inclusive education in the countries and provinces in which they worked and lived, or felt they could speak to regarding recent past work- or life-related experiences. The organizers of the conference identified 13 potential participants who had a strong reputation in the area of inclusive education due to their leadership in diverse parts of the world. Eleven (11) of the 13 were available to arrive at the conference early and participate in the focus group. The participants are listed in alphabetical order as authors 5-15 in this article. (The goal of the focus group was to obtain diverse perspectives on inclusive education. The conclusions and opinions communicated in this article do not necessarily represent the opinions of all participants or the position of the institutions to which they are affiliated.)

Participants and Settings

The participants represented nine home countries: Canada, Colombia, Czech Republic, India, Kenya, Nepal, Nicaragua, Philippines, and Portugal. They shared experiences related to said home countries in addition to experiences they have had working and/or living in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, Comoros, Ethiopia, Ghana, Italy, Mali, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, United States, and Zanzibar as well as the Canadian provinces of Quebec, Ontario, and New Brunswick. Four participants were parents of a child with a disability and two were family members of a person with a disability. Their positions varied and included educator, school administrator, governmental position in

disability services, private organization in disability advocacy or services, and university faculty member. Years of experience ranged from 10 to 47 years (*Mdn* = 23). None of the experts identified as a person with a disability.

Role of the Researcher

The research team consisted of two university faculty members and two doctoral students. The research team was entirely from the United States and all identified as White. One team member had worked with teachers and youth overseas, and one had spent 4 years of her childhood in Western Europe. One team member was a parent of an individual with a disability and two had siblings who identified as having a disability.

All research team members had assumed various roles in school settings prior to working on or completing their doctoral studies in special education in the United States. The team shared common research agendas focused on inclusive education and individuals with IDD. Based on the literature as well as our teaching experiences and research interests, the team hypothesized that experts would share dynamic and diverse experiences concerning disability and inclusive education. We aimed to better understand their multifaceted experiences at local, regional, and country levels across policies, practices, structures, and belief systems.

Data Sources and Collection

The focus group took place in person and was conducted by one member of the research team, also an attendee of the conference. We obtained informed consent from each participant prior to the start of the focus group. The semistructured interview was guided by an interview protocol (Merriam, 2002). The conversations that ensued were open-ended, but the guiding questions focused on inclusive education for youth with IDD. Prompts included: What is the current status of inclusive education in your country or in countries in which you are familiar? Are there any means to measure, or monitor, the status of inclusive education? What are some possible cultural norms or expectations in your country or other countries with which you are familiar that might serve to either encourage more inclusive education or discourage it? The focus group was

audio recorded and sent to a third-party transcription service.

Data Analysis

Three of the four research team members participated in the analysis and met at least once a week throughout this phase. First, the team read through the focus group transcript while listening to the audio recording. Any transcription errors were edited at this time. Then the team read through the transcript a second time to begin looking for small meaningful units of information as conveyed by the participants as related to the research question (Maxwell, 2013; Rodwell, 1998). The units (sometimes entire quotes) were sorted into categories and the categories were then defined. The team members used structural coding in this first round of analysis. Structural coding helped the research team look for similarities and differences across participant perspectives pertaining to each interview question (Saldaña, 2013). While presenting representative units, categories, and definitions to one another, the team looked for overlap and disagreement in how members had conceptualized their categories by staying close to the data and returning to the transcript (Rodwell, 1998). The team sought consensus on disagreements, reorganized the emerging codes, and created a code book by using causation coding in the second round. Causation coding led the team to focus on the participants' perspectives around the causes and outcomes as they pertained to the status of inclusive education (Saldaña, 2013). Then, team engaged in codifying as the codes were reapplied to the data (Saldaña, 2013).

Credibility and Trustworthiness

The team sought credible qualitative inquiry through several means. First, the team engaged in collaborative work which involved multiple team members in the analysis of the participants' realities (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). Second, when possible, the team used the language of the participants to name and define the categories (Charmaz, 2006). Staying close to the data and using the language of the participants increased the credibility in the analysis. Finally, the team engaged in second-level member-checking wherein the analysis and interpretations were presented to the participants prior

to publication for support of the research teams' conclusions (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

Findings

Focus group participants discussed contextual factors that impacted inclusive education as a dynamic construct based on their experiences. Contextual factors included spatial, historical/temporal, ideological, social, political, and economic elements. Following, we present findings from the focus group discussion in regard to participants' perspectives concerning (a) how these complex factors intersected and lived out across diverse and dynamic contexts, (b) strategies for promoting inclusive education, and (c) barriers to inclusive education.

Political and Ideological Dialectics

Focus group participants often discussed how political and ideological factors impacted the status of inclusive education in nuanced and dynamic ways. Moreover, participants also described ways in which political and ideological factors intersected and in doing so, influenced the status of inclusive education in tandem in particular countries. We defined *political factors* as: "Participants discuss political factors that impact the status of inclusive education, including local and national governmental policies, decisions, and implementation strategies." Political factors were also represented when participants discussed competing agendas across organizations and governmental structures. We defined *ideological factors* as: "Participants discuss how there are different perspectives on, beliefs about, and definitions for what inclusive education means and therefore how it is enacted." Ideological factors were also represented when members described who inclusive education was for and how disability was (or was not) conceptualized in their respective countries.

Beliefs about inclusive education were impacted by policies from within governmental structures. For example, in Nicaragua, students with disabilities were supported by the government to attend school. Indiana, the director of an organization promoting the advancement of inclusive practices in Nicaragua, explained, "Children have support, we have a structure from the Ministry of Education that supports [children with disabilities participating in inclusive education], but the concept of

support is with a special focus. Not with an inclusive focus." Here Indiana explained how a dual system was operating in Nicaragua. The idea of inclusive education was supported through governmental policy, but the act of inclusive education lived out as a traditional separate entity.

Ruchi, a consultant on inclusive education at the World Bank, shared a similar sentiment. She explained how many countries have strong, official policies at the national level which are very supportive of inclusive education. But the national policies are not necessarily consistent with interpretations and actions at the local school or classroom level. In some cases this is because the policy is not sufficiently explicit (e.g., the policy was not understood to be applicable to children with IDD). As Indiana discussed earlier, several participants shared experiences where ideologies that were left unfinished or misunderstood at the government level had lasting impacts on actions and planning within local communities and schools.

As the group members shared the complexities of the status of inclusive education across countries, another political-ideological interaction was shared through Jan's experiences. Jan, an academic in The Czech Republic, spoke about consulting with the Ethiopian government. He described how Ethiopia, as one of the only countries in Africa that was not colonized, had recently developed a 10-year master plan for inclusive education. He further explained, "Ethiopia does have two strong policies on inclusive education." While he noted this was a step in the right direction from a political standpoint, two ideological factors arose. Although there are only a small number of special schools in Ethiopia relative to the large population and the geographical size of the country, there has been an "unwillingness of special schools to turn into, to be open to inclusive education." The second ideological factor was that youth with IDD were placed on a hierarchy of access wherein they would be "the last to have access to education." In other words, Ethiopia's government was preparing policy documents that would guide the country's schools in becoming more inclusive. Yet, conflicting beliefs about what inclusive education was and who it was meant for persisted in practice.

Space and Economics Intersect

Participants discussed ways in which elements of spatiality as well as economic influences impacted

the status of inclusive education. Spatial factors encompassed how inclusive education was or was not enacted through and across varied settings, including physical school structures and where children spent time during the day. We defined *spatial factors* as: “Participants discuss spatial factors that impact the status of inclusive education, including physical structures, construction, and spatial infrastructure planning.” Within this complex junction, participants also discussed economic influences such as neoliberal-driven decisions wherein schools took up business models when considering the impact on change towards inclusive education. We defined *economic factors* as: “Participants discuss economic factors that impact the status of inclusive education, including money, purchases, and costs.” Although spatial factors as well as economic elements impacted the status of inclusive education on their own, participants also discussed ways in which spatial and economic factors worked in tandem to influence the status of inclusive education in their respective countries.

Participants discussed ways in which spatial and economic factors operated together to impact access to schools for youth with disabilities. Here, access included material, physical, social, and academic access. For example, Monica, the director of a Colombian organization that promotes inclusive education, stated, “We know how many students have registered in the [school] system but we don’t know how many are out [of school youth]. . . . We need to call it what it is. In many countries maintaining a dual system of education is a business.” Monica’s perspective echoed how different spatial factors, including where youth were located (out of school versus in school, in the register versus invisible), intersected with how schools were being operated (based on a business model).

Later in the focus group, the complexities of space and economics arose when discussing resources (material, economic, social) across countries. Gordon, the director of Inclusive Education Canada, explained, “So in wealthier places, you can buy solutions that sort of mask the problem in a way that you can’t in poor countries. They can’t buy that. . . . You can ease the tension in rich countries because you can buy temporary solutions.” Here, Gordon described how money could ease the strain associated with advancing inclusive education by “masking” what is actually happening in a particular location. In this way, monetary

resources could be used to preserve previously established educational practices in schools at local and national levels.

It was revealed through the participants’ conversations that change concerning inclusive education for youth with disabilities is multifaceted. Paula, the owner and principal researcher at Disability, Education and Development and a native of Portugal, acting as Senior Technical Consultant for Inclusion International, also responded to the questions surrounding resources. Specifically, she noted how an overabundance of resources can act a barrier to inclusive education: “In rich countries, you [can] have a lot more segregation. Toronto is a rich city and it can have a school for the deaf, a school for the blind because it has more resources.” Here Paula complicated the narrative that although wealthier countries (economics) can have more inclusive schools and communities (space), that is not always the case.

Strategies for Promoting Inclusive Education

Participants shared a number of strategies that facilitate the implementation of inclusive education locally and nationally, including using collective agency, using model schools, contextualizing practices, and shifting ideologies.

Having collective agency. We defined *collective agency* as: “Participants discussed working with political leaders, families, and other leaders to advocate for inclusive education.” Collective agency was discussed by participants through examples of actions they, along with others, have undertaken. For example, Fatma, with Inclusion Africa, discussed establishing a working relationship with a newly appointed directorate in the Kenyan government: “We have regular interactions with them. And there is a lot of discussion [about] moving towards inclusive education.” Collective agency was not discussed by participants as a singular effort; rather, as Indiana described in her work with families and the Ministry of Education in Nicaragua, it is a sustained effort to “push the topic [of] . . . real inclusive education” across many opportunities. The participants’ responses thus demonstrated the on-going need to work together, over time, to advocate for and implement equitable inclusive education.

Using model schools. This group of experts also discussed the importance of making inclusive

education visually and tangibly real to stakeholders to make a very abstract idea real. We defined the use of the *model schools strategy* as: “Participants discussed taking stakeholders to visit model inclusive schools.” Participants considered strengths of this approach as bridging theory into practice. As Jan noted, model schools “play a very important role in promoting inclusive education [for] others on the regional or local level.” Although participants identified strengths of this strategy, they also acknowledged some of its complications. It was noted that many of these model classrooms originated as pilot programs, and once the funding for these pilot programs end, so do the inclusive classrooms. Ruchi pointed out that what is needed is a focus on sustainability that incorporated the strengths and skills of the local community to maintain these model inclusive pilot programs over the long term. Another complication to model schools was explained by participants as a contextual fit between the model school and the local community. As Jan noted, “an excellent school or model might be completely different than the [local] context.” Thus, there is limited expectation that a model school will contribute to creating further inclusive schools; instead, Jan suggested creating “case studies” in which inclusive model schools share strategies that worked, and did not work, as a strategy for bridging a gap between model school and local contexts. As discussed by the participants, the potential benefit of using model schools is making inclusive practices visible and tangible for a wider audience; however, the participants also note the potential pitfalls of model schools in terms of sustainability and contextual fit.

Contextualizing practices. The need to contextualize practices was a dominant strategy discussed by the participants. We defined *contextualizing practices* as: “Participants discussed strategies that accounted for situations in particular towns, cities, and countries that would move processes and practices towards greater inclusivity in schools.” As Gordon noted, inclusion is going to look and be different in diverse local and national areas, because conditions and practices of schools vary globally. As an example, he noted schools in India may have 50 students in a class, whereas Canadian classrooms may have 25 students. The teaching practices and supports in these contexts will necessarily vary, but students with disabilities can be successfully included in natural proportions in both contexts. Similarly, Paula noted that she has

worked in countries that have “no special schools, no special education personnel trained.” She pointed out “[There] are no support services, and children with disabilities have never been in school. My approach to [promoting] inclusive education is going to be completely different [in places without existing special schools compared to places like] Eastern Europe with a very solid tradition of special education.”

Participants discussed the need to contextualize practices in contrast with the top-down, one-size-fits-all approach common from many governments and NGOs. Instead, as Gordon stated, “people will develop their own good practice” to fit the local contextual strengths and needs, and that doing so will require ongoing work, as “new problems are identified [and] new [contextually relevant] solutions sought.” This idea of building on local capacity was expanded upon by Mukunda, the president of The National Association of Intellectual Disabilities and Parents in Nepal, who described a process for identifying strengths and opportunities: “What infrastructure do we have? How can we make this classroom inclusive?” A further example of contextualizing discussed by the participants related to understanding needs in a broader national context. As Rolando, an expert on inclusive education from the Philippines working for UNICEF Kenya, noted, governments and NGOs are often forced to make decisions based on local and national priorities, and because some countries grapple with repeated natural disasters, such as typhoons and earthquakes in the Philippines, national leaders may be tempted to say “there’s so [many] bigger problems. . . your issue [inclusion] is not as important as these other issues.” To account for this, one strategy identified by Monica was to advocate that school resources are used for *all* students, so that “everybody can be better.”

Participants also expanded contextualizing practices beyond physical environments and related it to the people working for inclusive education. This form of contextualization related to inclusive education experts needing to be both cognizant of their role as an outsider and to build local capacity. At times, participants described being positioned as an outside expert as threatening to the local community. Fatma described this tension, noting that colleagues have told her she is “bringing Western concepts to Kenya.” Thus, the participants described a need to address contextualization in

their work, such as providing information assisting colleagues to think through information rather than “imposing something.” Tapping into political goodwill and flexibility in local communities who are interested in supporting members of their own communities was also described: “Communities have come in to support [students with disabilities]. . . [they] build ramps, accessible toilets, [provide] teacher aids to support teachers” and generally provide substantive resources to support the children in their community. Throughout the discussion, participants identified a variety of strategies to promote a contextual fit for implementing and sustaining inclusive practices, including understanding the historical and contemporary educational practices of the community and nation, building and engaging local capacity with a focus on all students, and capitalizing on local systems of support.

Shifting ideologies. Just as contextualizing was discussed as a key strategy for supporting inclusive education, participants reported the need to shift ideologies to reflect increasing inclusive practices. *Shifting ideologies* was defined as “Participants discussed reimagining and reframing education as inclusive of all students.” Shifting ideologies, then, meant “changing the lens” of how inclusive education is discussed and envisioned. Participants noted that countries without established segregated models of education presented unique opportunities to build inclusive schools from the beginning. As Paula noted, “what you are going to have to do is create a system from the ground up. . . which means that you are not going to spend your money and time and effort in creating special schools and special education staff, and all of those mechanisms that have been a barrier.” Participants identified this as an occasion to expand the idea of inclusive schools to benefit all marginalized students. As Indiana stated, “we have to [be] open with other groups. . . that are excluded for any reason. . . and [work together] for inclusive education for all.” Participants discussed how forming alliances facilitates shifting of ideologies to embrace the goal of inclusive education for all. Participants described how this might require advocates to simplify the message of inclusive education. Repeating the simple message that inclusion means “all children [are] in school together, all children learn together” might make the movement towards inclusive education more impactful and sustaining. In their conversations, participants noted the opportunities for expanding the focus of inclusive education to be

truly inclusive of all students, noting the benefits such a comprehensive, simplified definition would confer to stakeholders.

Barriers to Inclusive Education

Participants shared barriers to inclusive practices. We defined *barriers* as: “Any system, practice, or thinking that promotes inclusive education for some but not all students.” In other words, “taking baby steps” toward inclusion in ways that are unsustainable or that negatively impact access to general education content and contexts act as a barrier to authentic, workable inclusive education. A readiness approach to inclusive education, sustainability, and external support were identified by multiple participants as barriers to the continued implementation of inclusive practices. These barriers to inclusion were strategies or practices that inhibited progress or promoted more segregated educational practices.

Readiness approach. A *readiness approach* to inclusive education was defined as: “Practices that continually exclude children with disabilities from the general education content and contexts until they meet prerequisite skills or levels of independence.” This approach included systems and practices that considered inclusive education as a viable option for only children who “fit” into the existing general education system without needing extensive individualized supports. Monica described elements of the readiness model as the view that “the child is not ready;” acknowledging that this “tends to be the rationale people use” to explain why certain students are not eligible to be included in general education classes. Fatma added that many children are placed in special education classes based solely on a medical diagnosis or academic assessment. As an example, she noted that if a student “has Down syndrome, [they are] placed in a special unit. [Student placement] does not look beyond the diagnosis to what supports and services the child requires for them to be able to learn on an equal basis with the others.” The readiness approach seemed to extend out of schools and into policy. Ruchi found in her recent analysis of education sector plans for 51 countries that children with IDD were rarely mentioned. Instead, what were generally captured in terms of implementation provision and action planning were students who do not require extensive supports to access inclusive educational opportunities. Several

other participants confirmed that this was also their experience. The readiness approach, or belief that children with IDD are not prepared or do not have adequate skills to participate in general education content and contexts, was a theme woven through the discussion by many participants.

Sustainability. A second theme identified across participants as a barrier to inclusive practices was sustainability. Participants defined the barrier of *sustainability* as: “Practices that are advocated for and implemented by individuals or short-term initiatives such as pilot programs that are not able to be scaled up.” The difficulty of having only small pockets of support for inclusive education was described by Diane, chair of the Catalyst for Inclusive Education Initiative of Inclusion International: “There may be children with disabilities who are included well in a particular class or in a school, but that is so dependent on the particular teacher or the fact that a child does not need anything that would require systemic support.” She added that when a child with disabilities who was included moves to a different grade or school with less support for inclusion, they are typically placed back in a more segregated learning environment. Inclusive pilot-school programs were identified as a threat to the sustainability of inclusive practices. Gordon stated that pilot-schools “are a waste of time” and expressed, “Making schools inclusive is an ongoing, everlasting challenge...and [short term] pilots are never going to get you to where you want to go.” Instead, ongoing support from a systems level, with policy makers, school administration, teachers, and parents, continually working together to sustain inclusive practices is a necessity.

External supports. Last, external support in the form of foreign aid and NGO initiatives emerged as a theme in the discussion of barriers to inclusive education. The theme of *external support* as a barrier was defined as: “The integration of financial or material supports that do not promote inclusive practices or intentionally integrate separate educational services for children with disabilities.” Diane explained a frequent problem of external support occurs when governments accepted foreign aid with no measure of what it will accomplish, “whether it is another donor country, a multilateral institution, or international non-government organization, if someone is bringing money into a country, they are allowed to do whatever they want.” The problem occurred when there was “no standard in terms of what they

are promoting in terms of education of students with disabilities” because they may be perpetuating segregated support models. Although participants discussed positive impacts NGOs have regarding inclusive education, their comments often came with a caveat such as Indiana’s, “I saw an international organization supporting a primary school [where the] focus is special, and they do not know anything about inclusive education.” Ines also voiced concerns about schools run by NGOs, “Even [international and local NGOs] run some schools. Which, they are not schools, they are day programs for people with disabilities.” Indiana suggested that this barrier may be best addressed by fostering collaboration between advocacy groups, NGOs, donors, and governments.

Discussion

Analysis of the focus group transcripts revealed a rich discussion amongst the 11 experts on inclusive education, representing five continents. Multiple factors affecting inclusive education were identified, including barriers and facilitators.

Participants identified a variety of intersecting factors impacting inclusive education, including policy, space, and economics. Education policy was described in terms of both its written content and how it is enacted, with participants identifying ways in which these often contrasted. Although developing written policy is an important first step in creating innovative practices, the capacity of policy to accomplish national and international goals remains uncertain (e.g., Daeyoung & Dhungana, 2014). Participants similarly noted tensions between space and economics when describing factors associated with inclusive education. Although access to physical and monetary resources may support inclusive practices in some locales, access to resources can also serve as a barrier to inclusive education by facilitating the construction of separate, *specialized* facilities (Slee, 2008). Similarly, contexts with less access to monetary resources may be rich in human resources, enabling communities to develop highly supportive inclusive schools, which is less costly than building separate, specialized schools (World Health Organization, 2011, Ch. 7).

Among the strategies for implementing inclusive education, participants highlighted the need to focus on contextual fit when transferring successful practices from one setting to another, collective

agency, and focusing on all students. Contextual fit was described as using local resources, strengths, and capacity to implement inclusive practices. International studies have consistently recognized local teachers and schools require human and material resources to implement inclusive practices, and that such resources are most effective when they align with contextual needs and strengths (e.g., Ahmmed et al., 2012). When considered globally, the need for contextual fit becomes even clearer, as resources, needs, and capacities in terms of teacher preparation, policy, and historical contexts vary considerably and play important roles in determining the most effective strategies for implementing inclusive education practices.

Participants also noted a shifting of the lens of inclusive education to be truly all-encompassing of all marginalized students, not just those who experience disability. This was identified by participants as a philosophical value (Shyman, 2015), but also a practical strategy. Combining advocacy resources allows stakeholders to work together towards a common goal of quality, inclusive education for all students, preventing the fracturing of messages and resources. Participants noted this will require collective agency, but also a uniform definition of inclusive education. The movement towards inclusive education has long been plagued by lack of consistent definition of the term globally (e.g., Thomazet, 2009; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013). To make progress, then, a definition of inclusive education that is comprehensive in its focus on all students, and easy to describe to others, is needed.

Three barriers to inclusive education were identified consistently across participants. Barriers included a readiness approach to inclusive education, sustainable instructional models, and external support. A readiness approach to inclusive education was described by participants as practices in which students must attain certain skill levels before being included. International research corroborates the participant discussion, noting schools and education systems typically situate the barrier to inclusive education within the student, rather than addressing the educational resources and accommodations necessary for students (Daeyoung & Dhungana, 2014; De Los Ríos, 2007). An equity-based approach that adheres to the UNCRPD call to provide effective supports that maximize academic and social development is necessary to move away from the exclusionary practices of a readiness

approach (UN, 2006). Additionally, it will be important for teachers, administrators, and policy makers to shift beliefs that highlight student deficit to a more strengths-based approach (Johnstone & Chapman, 2009; Oluremi, 2015).

Sustainability of inclusive practices emerged as a barrier described by many focus group participants. Focusing on pilot programs, or individual teachers or schools, rather than systems-level change embodied this barrier. Although pilot programs have been effective in changing local attitudes toward inclusive education, without explicit local and national policy in conjunction with systems-level support, it is unlikely pilot programs will have a lasting or far-reaching impact on inclusive practices (World Health Organization, 2011). Rather, multilevel, systemic support for inclusive education has been identified as a necessity to ensure sustainability of inclusive education for students with disabilities (Johnstone & Chapman, 2009).

External support in the form of donor aid or initiatives also emerged as a barrier to inclusive practices. Participants reported countries often accept financial or material aid for education without ensuring the implementation of that aid reflects inclusive practices. Consequently, multiple international NGOs, bilateral agencies, multilateral agencies under the UN, and the national government may all run separate educational initiatives (Kafle, 2014). Thus, there is a need for all initiatives to have a common philosophy of inclusive education.

Limitations and Future Directions for Research

The limitations of the present study inform future research. The single focus group as the corpus of data analyzed is the most significant limitation. Future research investigating international stakeholder perceptions ought to include additional data sources, such as analysis of policy documents. Similarly, the viewpoints expressed represent only a small portion of the stakeholders working to promote inclusive education globally. Future research would benefit from increasing the diversity of perspectives shared, including those working for governments, NGOs, and in local schools. Moreover, focus groups provide a limited perspective and would benefit from in-depth observations of inclusive education in action. Finally, future focus

groups and observations should include students and adults with disabilities, along with family members, as participants, as these perspectives were largely absent in this study.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Findings from the current study provide a variety of implications for policy and practice, each of which must be interpreted within the context of the limitations of the present study. Three policy implications are considered here. First, responses from the focus group highlight the need to specifically include students with IDD in policy documents referencing inclusive education. Without such a direct reference to include this population, their continued exclusion from school, and school inclusion, is at risk. Second, policies must reflect contextual factors at the local, state, and national levels. Simply copying existing, albeit well-crafted, policies from one nation or context to another jeopardizes the ability to implement the policy given local cultural norms and practices. Finally, policy “in the books” must better reflect policy “in practice.” In other words, written policies should be enacted in real schools, in consideration of the current education practices, resources, and expectations of the setting. When written policies are dramatically out of touch with current practices or expectations, professionals on the front-line of service delivery may continue to create different, less-inclusive policy by their daily actions and decisions (Lipsky, 2010).

We further consider two practice implications of the current study. First, advocates promoting inclusive education must be cognizant of their role and place as an outsider. That is, advocates must recognize any effects of their positions and ideologies, including how these match, or fail to match, local cultural norms, practices, and ideologies. Supporting local capacity to encourage inclusive practice is essential. Second, advocates working for inclusive education would benefit from a focus on sustainable, reciprocal partnerships (Darling, Dukes, & Hall, 2016). As described by participants in this study, many inclusive education endeavors risk being short-term pilot programs supported by outside groups without a clear focus on sustainability. Engaging local communities to enter partnerships that center reciprocity, sustainability, and building of local capacity is thus a potentially useful step in disrupting this trend.

Conclusion

To continue to ensure the development and sustainability of inclusive education for students with IDD at a global level, recognition of the factors contributing to inclusive education, along with strategies and potential barriers to its implementation, are needed. The focus group research described here offers preliminary evidence that can be used to promote inclusive education across the globe, with specific structures and strategies for stakeholders to consider. We hope this study will support the continued efforts of international inclusive education advocates and those taking up this effort so students with IDD, and all who are currently excluded from schools, might receive quality and equitable inclusive education.

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- Authors:**
Jennifer A. Kurth, Amanda L. Miller, Samantha Gross Toews, and James R. Thompson, University of Kansas; **Mónica Cortés**, Colombia Coordinadora Red de Familias por el Cambio; **Mukunda Hari Dahal**, National Association of Intellectual Disabled & Parents; **Inés E. de Escallón**, Inclusion International; **Paula Frederica Hunt**, Disability, Education & Development; **Gordon Porter**, Inclusive Education Canada; **Diane Richler**, Inclusion International; **Indiana Fonseca**, Asociación Nicaragüense para la Integración Comunitaria, ASNIC; **Ruchi Singh**, World Bank Group; **Jan Šiška**, Charles University; **Rolando Jr. Villamero**, Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation, UNICEF Kenya; and **Fatma Wangare**, Kenya Association of Intellectually Handicapped.
- Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jennifer A. Kurth, University of Kansas, 1122 West Campus Road, Joseph R. Pearson Hall Room 241, Lawrence, KS 66045 (e-mail: jkurth@ku.edu).