

Katja Jeznik, PhD, Nina Kristl

Attitudes towards Inclusion and Justice in Vocational Education and Training

The paper analyses the views of head teachers, school counsellors and teachers on inclusion and justice in vocational education and training. Inclusion and justice are key cornerstones of most contemporary educational communities, as revealed by various theoretical discussions (Banks, 2023; Haug, 2017; Opertty et al., 2009; Reindal, 2016; Thomas, 2013; Warnock, 2010) as well as programme-policy orientations (Reimagining Our Futures Together, 2021; UNESCO, 1994). The main conclusions lead to the observation that the way diversity is addressed in the education system also determines its degree of equitable inclusion (Akkan & Buğra, 2020, p. 143).

Education professionals need to be supported and encouraged to use more inclusive pedagogical approaches; therefore, it is also very important to discern their understanding of inclusion and their views on inclusion through an equity perspective. The aim of this paper is to offer insights into these reflections.

The paper highlights the differences in the understanding of inclusion according to the historical context and the target groups to which it relates. Haug (2017) relates the beginnings of the development of the concept of inclusion to a narrower understanding of inclusion and refers to it as integration. It relates to the integration of individuals into an educational community, following the belief that the physical integration of an individual into the community is sufficient for their inclusion, which unfortunately is not the case. Integration-oriented practices demonstrate that an individual is only welcomed into a community if they can adapt adequately to the demands of the environment, given the various adaptations resulting from legislation, and not otherwise. This is a shift away from the concept of inclusion, which presupposes adaptations on both sides, i.e., on the part of the community and on the part of the person being integrated into the community. Contemporary societies are moving from a narrow understanding of inclusion, i.e., inclusion viewed as the integration of people with disabilities into the educational process, to a broader understanding of inclusion. The broader understanding is based on a common pedagogical understanding of inclusion, and the diversity of individuals is valued as a positive starting point for contemporary educational communities. Such a concept presupposes a move away from the predominantly special pedagogical treatment of excluded students towards general pedagogical and didactic approaches and strategies. Several authors (Burke et al., 2023; Ermenc et al., 2019; Haug, 2017; Lesar, 2019) point out that the general pedagogical concept of inclusion goes beyond focusing on individuals and groups who traditionally receive different, usually special, pedagogical treatment in the school environment (e.g., people with special needs), and instead refers to all learners.

The paper also highlights the aspect of just inclusion. It draws on a multidimensional understanding of justice (Fraser et al., 2004; Lesar, 2022; Lynch et al., 2009, 2021) and three aspects seem to be of research interest from the viewpoint of examining perspectives on inclusion: the redistributive aspect of justice, recognition, and representation. Each dimension highlights a particular way in which an individual is included, and it is therefore assumed that inclusion is a concept that can be more equitably realised by considering the different dimensions of justice.

The starting point of justice in the West is the most equitable distribution of basic goods, which is usually associated with opportunities to assert individual rights through the redistribution of goods and access to social power – in schools, by creating conditions for optimal learning

achievement through the reduction of barriers and the provision of additional support to those in need. However, differences in rights are justified if they are in favour of the most disadvantaged (positive discrimination). The cornerstones of this redistributive understanding of justice were created five decades ago by John Rawls (1971). This dimension of justice was later criticised, mainly because of the awareness that such an understanding of justice does not sufficiently address the various reasons for inequality among learners; it focuses mainly on economically driven inequality, while overlooking others. As an important extension of this aspect of justice, various authors (Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Fraser et al., 2004; Fraser, 2007; Knijn et al., 2020) have identified recognition that presupposes the rights of traditionally overlooked cultures. Recognition basically means respect for different lifestyles, worldviews, life circumstances, health situations, etc. – not only at the level of recognition of certain rights and freedoms, as presupposed by the redistributive dimension of justice. In school, it is manifested, for example, in a disability discourse (negative recognition) being replaced by a handicap discourse (positive recognition).

Building on some of the criticisms of recognition (misrecognition and non-recognition), Fraser et al. (2004) expand on redistribution and recognition with representation, which tends to involve different social groups and individuals in decision-making in terms of their power and influence over positions in the community. This dimension of justice is derived from the equality of conditions for (political) power in (co)decisionmaking at different levels of social life and for different social groups. In schools, this is manifested in the involvement of all students in decision-making processes, including the involvement of individuals with SEN in the development of additional professional support, etc.

Education, through its practices of inclusion and exclusion, on the one hand reinforces existing social inequalities, and on the other plays an important role in overcoming injustice and addressing inequalities and inequities in society. Despite some criticisms, further research into the different dimensions of justice is important, particularly as socio-economic inequalities can also affect access to education. Poverty is thus still considered to be one of the causes and consequences of inequalities in education, leading to individuals leaving school early and affecting the opportunities of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, it is not only poverty, but also many other personal circumstances, e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, culture, religion, etc. (Akkan & Buğra, 2020).

The empirical part of the paper is a combination of respondents' (n = 427) answers to an open-ended question on their understanding of inclusion and their views on inclusion through the three dimensions of justice: redistribution, recognition and representation. Two decades ago, Booth and Ainscow (2002) developed a framework for measuring inclusion in the UK, which assumes measures of educational agency at three levels: policy, by establishing appropriate systemic solutions and defining the rights of those who frequently face exclusion; culture, by establishing and reinforcing inclusive community values; and practice, as didactic support for those who often face exclusion and as the nurturing of relationships. The Index for Inclusion provides a starting point for identifying attitudes, barriers, potentials and aspirations for creating a more inclusive culture, policy and practice in a particular educational institution, which can also use it as a tool for self-evaluation (Ainscow, 2023). The paper assumes that the Index for Inclusion can also provide a good starting point for examining inclusive attitudes in vocational education and training. It was used as a basis for the development of statements to measure attitudes, and its content was related to the three dimensions of justice: redistribution, recognition and representation. The study was carried out in spring 2022 under the auspices of the Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education and Training, and more

detailed results have been published in two reports: Inclusion in Vocational Education and Training – First Report (2022) and Inclusion in Vocational Education and Training – Second Report (in press).

The findings of the study are inconclusive. It seems that the respondents' views are more indicative of an integrative rather than inclusive orientation. This is reflected in the endorsement of the views that too much time is allotted to special groups of students, that they should be dealt with by the school counselling service or external experts, etc. At the same time, the analysis of the answers to the open-ended question shows that the respondents' understanding of inclusion is complex, and that the shift away from an integrative stance can be identified both at the level of defining for whom inclusion should be intended and what its goal should be. The respondents overwhelmingly state that inclusion applies to all students, and that adaptations are not only related to the teaching process but also to necessary adaptations to the environment. In addition, their concern for achieving the set standards of knowledge is complemented by a concern for the attainment of appropriate vocational competences and the subsequent employability of the students.

In the future, system-oriented activities to increase the inclusion and justice of vocational education and training should be complemented by activities aimed at addressing the beliefs and attitudes of education professionals about their practices of including students who often face exclusion in the educational process. As this is such a complex topic, it would be useful to involve students in assessing the inclusion and justice of certain activities.

However, the paper also highlights some of the limitations of the research carried out. The sample of respondents would have been better if more head teachers and school counsellors had responded to the survey. The range of views on each dimension of justice could have been further expanded, and additional insights into the understanding of inclusion and justice could have been gained by asking respondents an open-ended question about their perceptions of justice