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The paradox of special education
Both school segregation and inclusive education are on the rise

Justin J.W. Powell

Debates about the best organization of schooling to serve children and youth with impairments, to deal with deviant behavior, and to address social disadvantage have continued from the Enlightenment up to the present day. Special education has grown to provide additional resources to help students with disabilities, learning difficulties, and disadvantages to access the curriculum and succeed in school. These diverse programs have served a population of students continuously changing in size and composition, but especially poor boys, children belonging to racial, ethnic, migrant, or linguistic minority groups, and disabled children.

Around the world, special education programs offer assistance not only to children with a range of impairments, but, increasingly, also to those with a variety of newly defined student disabilities, or "special educational needs." With the aim to facilitate access to schooling, campaigns to raise awareness, disciplinary diagnostics, and professional knowledge have led to an increasing proportion of children and youth with disadvantages or disabilities. Thus, like other types of education, from primary and secondary to tertiary education, special education has grown remarkably.

However, in many societies learning support has been provided in environments (far) removed from the regular classroom. Segregated educational programs, whether offered in special schools or classrooms, are criticized for stigmatizing children and youth and for insufficiently reducing inequalities in education and training, which limit labor market participation and often lead to social exclusion. As a consequence, calls for change in school structures and practices have been voiced globally. While there is consensus that all children and youth – regardless of ability level – should participate in schooling, there is growing doubt about the principle that special schooling for some is necessary – or even preferable.

International charters, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (2006), call the taken-for-grantedness of special education settings that segregate or separate students into question. Instead, it emphasizes accessibility and a range of other measures to ensure educational and social participation. Article 24 mandates inclusive education for all, including vocational training, higher education, and lifelong learning. Its stipulations challenge the legitimacy of segregated schooling even as it demands that policymakers address myriad structural and cultural barriers to inclusion. Yet this shift occurs at the same time that rising academic standards and output measures of achievement and attainment place pressure on general education to increase school performance. In turn, this undergirds the exclusion of learners who do not test well or require additional support to reach their learning goals.

These forces in different directions have led to a paradox: the simultaneous rise in rates of segregated schooling and inclusive education. These contrary developments are embedded in the larger phenomenon of education expansion. The rise in participation in formal schooling has led to ever-higher attainment rates in secondary and tertiary education and ever-longer careers, and these rising standards reveal starkly many who do not achieve (much) school success. With ever more pupils "having special educational needs," both the rates of segregated and inclusive schooling can rise.

Kurzgefasst: Sonderpädagogische Förderung nimmt seit Jahrzehnten weltweit zu, oft in Sonderschulen oder -klassen. Seit 2006 haben sich 106 Länder durch Ratifizierung der UN-Behindertenrechtskonvention dem Ziel verpflichtet, von der Frühförderung bis zur Erwachsenenbildung das Bildungssystem inklusiv umzugestalten. Es mag paradox erscheinen, dass gleichzeitig sowohl *segregierende* als auch *inklusive* Lernumwelten expandieren. Der Grund: Die Verflechtung und Wechselwirkungen zwischen sonderpädagogischen Fördersystemen, allgemeiner Pädagogik und anderen Institutionen sowie die Interessen der beteiligten Professionen verhindern die Transformation hin zur schulischen Inklusion für alle.

Summary: Often provided in special schools and classes, special education has grown rapidly for decades. In contrast, since 2006, 106 countries around the world have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, which mandates inclusive education, from early childhood to lifelong learning. A contemporary paradox found in many societies is that both school segregation and inclusive education are on the rise. The interdependencies between special education, general education and other institutions along with vested professional interests have thus far hindered the transformations needed to realize inclusive education for all.

For example, in Germany, where the UN Convention took effect in 2009 and inclusive education (*Integrationspädagogik*) has been developed and practiced in some *Länder* for decades, attendance in special schools continues to grow, especially rapidly in Eastern Germany. In 2008, more pupils than ever before received some special education support: 480,000, or 6 percent of all pupils of compulsory school age. Of those, 89,000 (18 percent) attended regular schools. With that Germany is one of the European countries with the lowest overall inclusion rates and conversely highest levels of school segregation. Thus far, in terms of schooling, Germany has made few and gradual changes toward meeting its commitment to the UN Convention. This is so especially due to the institutionalization of special schools, professional interests, and federal governance. In another federal country, the United States, there is a long tradition of special classes within regular schools. The US has a much higher inclusion rate – over half of all pupils with special educational needs – and less than 4 percent of pupils with special educational needs attend special schools or residential institutions. Whereas Germany has a special education system built upon inter-school segregation, the US system is organized around intra-school separation. Despite increases, neither country's education system is fully inclusive as the UN Convention mandates.

The resulting paradox cannot be explained solely by analyzing inclusive *or* special education, whether conceptually or empirically. Rather, we must explore the drivers of change in these two fields jointly. Special education's domain stretches far beyond the boundaries of general education. Its organizational field includes health care systems, vocational training programs and transition planning, and labor markets. Because special education serves many of the most disadvantaged youth, it also shares an organizational community with the juvenile justice system. Special education is central to the operation of these other systems and this interconnectedness of special education to such neighboring institutions makes proposals for transformative change, such as the UN Convention, more difficult to achieve.

In many countries, segregated schools have become synonymous with limitations, exclusion, and low social status. More than ever before, being disabled remains linked to being less educated than one's peers. Conversely, attaining less education leads to an increased risk of becoming disabled, of experiencing poverty, and of suffering social exclusion. Considerable inequalities in learning opportunities persist. In many countries, segregation is still the dominant mode of providing special education support and services. Some groups of teachers, administrators, and other professionals have little interest in systemic shifts that would limit their autonomy or require them to assume additional roles, especially when political support for financing such reforms is lacking.

Yet international comparisons show that some countries successfully implement inclusive education reforms, even when this demands transformative change in education systems. Within Europe or among the OECD countries, the rates of inclusive education vary from under 10 percent to more than 90 percent. This range emphasizes the gap between the global rhetoric of inclusive education and the realities of institutionalized organizational forms in special education, whether special schools, as found in Germany, or special classrooms, prevalent in the United States. Tremendous variation across countries underscores the inertia in special education and the persistence of particular organizational forms, which results from interconnections with other institutions and cultural values, such as individualism or collectivism. Whereas many societies emphasize group belonging regardless of student characteristics, others have favored individual education rights and choices. Further, individuals and groups differ in whether they value the resources special education offers more than they fear the stigmatizing effects of its labels – or vice-versa.

Inclusive education promises to more fully utilize the diversity of interests and abilities found among all groups of children to develop each individual's intellectual and social competencies. Responding to these principles and global trends, states and nongovernmental organizations around the world have committed themselves to "education for all" – and to inclusive education. Globally,

inclusive education has risen as a goal. Thus far, 106 countries worldwide have ratified the UN Convention. Locally, advocates and activists in the disability rights movement have succeeded in increasing access to integrated schools or even inclusive classrooms.

However, transformative education system reforms that would do most to enable inclusive schooling have thus far been hindered by ideological, normative, and political resistance. This is partially because the paradigm shift toward inclusive education not only affects special education deeply, but also challenges the status quo, as elaborated in interconnected education, economic, and justice systems. Thus, in many countries, battles continue at the nexus of education and social policy. The results of these conflicts influence whether and when countries around the world will achieve their shared goal of inclusive education.

The simultaneous rise of segregation and inclusion emphasizes not individual characteristics, but rather institutionalized organizations that provide schooling. The seemingly paradoxical rise – indeed, the coexistence – of school segregation and inclusion depends on continued expansion in the group of children and youth who receive additional resources to access the curriculum. However, the logic of segregation that posits separation as necessary to provide such individualized learning supports contradicts the powerful idea codified in international human rights charters that to strengthen democracy and enable active citizenship requires nothing less than inclusive education for all.

[Foto: David Ausserhofer]

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