

BOOK REVIEW. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*. (On press, 2023)

Webster, R. (2022) *The Inclusion Illusion. How children with special educational needs experience mainstream schools*. London: UCL Press.

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<https://www.uclpress.co.uk/theinclusionillusion>

Review 1:

How much illusion, delusion and confusion about the inclusive education scope?

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I would like, first of all, to sincerely congratulate Rob Webster for the book we are discussing now, for the great research work behind it, for his accurate analyzes and for his provocative conclusions (well reflected in the title) although, everything converges, along with other works, in a somewhat discouraging global assessment - and not only relative to England but also to many other parts of the world, relative to the quality of this complex process towards a more inclusive education in what concerns, in particular, to the students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) After reading I recalled the title and main refrain of a song by the Spanish singer-songwriter JM Serrat that says "I like everything about you...but not you". The singer talks about a woman who, analyzed by parts (her mouth, her skin, her look...), each of them is very attractive and desirable, but when the parts are composed and integrated, let us say that the global personality of this woman, the sum is not so attractive, but, rather the opposite.

Certainly, something like this has happened to me when reading Webster's work. Analyzed by parts, almost all of them are valuable and praiseworthy; his rigorous writing that is also fluid and clear; his focus on that important piece that is the Teacher Assistants TAs incorporated into the schools in the belief (naive, in view of the results) that they could play a valuable role in collaborative work towards more inclusive school policies and practices; his courageous and comprehensive research design, with various methods of collection of information (highlighting his commitment to systematic observation); and finally his analysis and conclusions, which come to reveal, however, something that encourages my disappointment. I am referring to the recognition of a *structural exclusion* in the face of which the weak supposedly inclusive educational policies adopted by governments (national or local) seem to collide without a significant transformative effect, like waves facing an impregnable cliff. That is why I hope that you will allow me to use the opportunity that this text offers me, not so much to analyze in greater detail Webster's book, which, as I have said, I value very positively, but to call on its potential readers, obviously starting with the author of the work, to the urgent task of denouncing - I do not know if with more force or with a better strategy - how the great moral dilemma (frequently pointed out by the academy) that is being experienced daily regarding inclusive education is being resolved. A dilemma exists because, on the one hand, many of us firmly defend the moral and ethical commitment to the *full inclusion* of all students with SEND, including, therefore, those with more complex and generalized support needs - in line with what is established by UNCRPD (2006) - but, on the other hand, and starting with governments, but not only these, that many seem to observe with obvious disdain the

constant international evidence that the ordinary school we have (not the *irregular school* that we want; Slee, 2011) shows itself to be structurally incapable of responding with true quality to its inclusion.

No doubt transformation processes are time consuming, but how much more? Almost fifty years have passed since the first legislative initiatives in the US in the mid-1970s (the EHA, 1975), or the Education Act (1981) in England, following the world-renowned Warnock Report (1978) or almost thirty of the no less well-known and reiterated *Declaration of Salamanca* (UNESCO, 1994). The unbearable harshness of this dilemma is that the emotional and social well-being of a large part of those students with SEND that inclusion wants to serve, but cannot or do not want to, is at stake. The evidence from many families in very different places confirm this, starting in England (Satherley and Norwich, 2022). Surely this is a compelling reason why enrollment in special education schools, far from decreasing, increases (before the undaunted eyes of the same legislator who signed the UNCRPD) and above all it is perceived by many families as a desirable response and necessary for their children with SEND after having lived through negative and traumatic experiences in the ordinary schools, where they began their schooling. This evidence seems to tell us about a probably growing *resigned attitude* of abandonment in the fight for the rights of their children (clearly dissatisfied) for the sake of prioritizing their greater daily well-being.

So, before this situation, are we academics just content to continue denouncing the “illusion” (Webster, 2022), the “delusion” (Kauffman, Ward and Bader, 2016) or the “confusion” of inclusion (Wedell, 2008). Is it the moment to agree with Tiernan (2022, p. 887) about her proposal regarding to a “pragmatic full inclusion”? which means: “Acknowledging and legitimizing such specialist provision outside the mainstream classroom, that is, adapting the understanding of full inclusion in the short-term, then progressing towards full inclusion becomes more possible in the long-term”. Undoubtedly it is an option fraught with risk because if the ordinary educational system has not felt committed to full inclusion to date, it is to be expected that if this door is left open for a provision outside ordinary schooling, then the pressure for the profound transformation that is needed to advance will notably decrease. This could have the perverse effect of consolidating forever the same excluding dual system (ordinary versus special education) that has been the focus for change over several decades.

But if you say "NO" to this pragmatic full inclusion for the sake of our convictions and principles, are we willing to continue sacrificing many students with SEND on the altar of the confusion of a deluded inclusion? To how many, to whom? Will we be condemned to live forever trapped in this dilemma? I do not have an answer to these questions that deeply disturb me and therefore I call for thinking about them without delay (Calderón and Echeita, 2022). If we agree with Tiernan (2022) and other academics that as long as we do not find a path and really powerful, radical and effective strategies to overcome the existing ableism in our society, through which we divide the people based on a socially constructed “normality” criterion, inclusive education will be frustrating. I want to continue thinking that it is necessary and

possible, the *dream of that summer night* in Salamanca (UNESCO, 1994) when we collectively believed that we would soon see a new, extraordinary, inclusive school.

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Review 2:

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Rob Webster pursues a very controversial thesis, postulating an 'inclusion illusion' in English schools. However, if one follows his argumentation, an 'inclusion paradox' would be an additional or even more suitable characterisation, in line with his statement that inclusion is 'a contradiction in terms [...] [w]here structures and processes are ingrained within these settings that serve to exclude and marginalise' pupils with special educational needs (SEN). Webster argues that inclusion efforts in their present form create 'structural exclusion': mainstream education remains reserved for pupils without SEN, while 'diluted pedagogical offers' are tolerated for pupils with SEN.

Both the argumentation and the empirical study described in the book are based on an expedient framework. Webster extends Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory model by focusing on smaller, nested contexts within the school 'microsystem': classrooms and smaller groups of pupils organised within classrooms that have distinct dynamics. In these contexts, the postulated structural exclusion arises because – following Webster's thesis – the contexts and context attributes differ for pupils with and without SEN, especially for those with high-level SEN. Webster's study took place in the English educational system; however, embedding the study's thesis and theoretical foundation in Bronfenbrenner's internationally established model enables comparison with other educational systems, but certainly not completely, because school structures, traditions, teacher education and professionalisation, etc. in

mainstream and special education are different between and within educational systems in Europe and worldwide.

The research design is based on a complex multi-method approach. At its core was systematic observation, further enriched with case studies, interviews with different stakeholders, documentation on pupils, qualitative field notes, etc. Systematic observation is an established research method; however, it is liable to criticism about the generalisability of the results (see Anguera 2019). All the researchers involved made every effort to ensure validity and reliability to create generalisable findings: they conducted several rounds of inter-rater reliability checks, including contemporaneous coding of the same phenomenon by different researchers, developed a category system and examined the extent of agreement between the codes by calculating reliability coefficients (kappa); such a procedure is appropriate to ensure the validity and reliability of the collected data (Landis and Koch 1977). Collecting such a labour- and resource-intensive amount of data using different approaches and including different actors (e.g. fieldworkers made 57,467 observations, with 1,133 documented hours of systematic observation) is a remarkable merit of both the study and the researchers. Within the field of research on inclusion the data situation is often poor and conclusions often derived, for example, from small samples; against this background, the complex approach and the large data volume of this study stand out positively.

If one takes Webster's definition of inclusion as basis, the results of the study appear far-reaching. If the 'core precept of inclusion is to ensure that the everyday educational experience of pupils with SEN has parity with that of pupils without SEN[D]' then the results actually lead the present system of inclusion ad absurdum. Exemplary core results were that educational environments were similar to a system of streaming. Differentiation, grouping, was one of the main teaching methods used: pupils without SEN were grouped in mostly high-attaining groups, whereas pupils with SEN were often grouped with pupils identified as low-attaining and/or as having SEN. Consequently, pupils with SEN did not experience teaching in mixed attainment groups as frequently as their peers, which they experienced as a label of 'being in the bottom set'. Furthermore, in many cases, responsibility for teaching pupils with high-level SEN was relinquished from teachers to teaching assistants (TAs). In particular, TAs, who should actually enable inclusion, produced exclusion by reinterpreting or rephrasing the teacher's front-of-class talk, narrowing the pupils' opportunities to work unaided or uninterrupted, etc. Additionally, TAs often separated pupils with SEN from their peers by teaching them outside the classroom, meaning that pupils received a decreasing proportion of their pedagogical input from teachers compared to pupils without SEN.

These findings reflect the initially postulated paradox. Mainstream schools have invested significant amounts of resources and credibility in building and maintaining what Webster terms 'alleged to be inclusive experiences' for pupils with high-level SEN. Nevertheless, resources that should promote inclusion actually promote patterns of separation and segregation. As is so often the case, there is a yawning gulf between ambition and effects.

Although pupils with different SEN types were involved in the study, the presentation of the results combines all data for all pupils. Webster points out that the initial analyses of the observation data showed only a *few* differences between pupils with, for example, moderate learning difficulties (MLD) and pupils with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD). As many studies have illustrated the particular position of pupils with BESD with regard to inclusion/exclusion (e.g. Krull, Wilbert, and Hennemann 2018) and Webster speaks about *few* differences, these few differences, as well as a discussion on why the differences were so small in contrast to other studies, would have been interesting.

With regard to the methods used, conclusions about pupils' performances and performance development were only possible to a very limited extent. One could only speculate cautiously because the study design did not include data on students' outcomes, such as grades and performance measurement. Extrapolating from pupils without SEN receiving more and higher-quality teacher-led teaching compared with pupils with SEN being partially taught by TAs to higher or lower performances in mainstream education without having the respective data has to be carefully considered. For this, complex longitudinal studies that consider both performance parameters and comparison groups (e.g. with/without TAs) would be necessary.

Overall, the study analysed in-depth structures and their distinct dynamics in the classroom at the microsystem level of schools, providing differentiated findings; for example, the systematic observation showed qualitative cause–effect relationships between resources, staff, teaching methods and pupils' perceptions – between ambitions and effects.

Even if one finds Webster's thesis too provocative and his conclusions too far-reaching, both deliver necessary food for thought. This applies especially to the stated tripartite model: teaching pupils with SEN in mainstream classes is only possible with and therefore depends on (additional) resources, but these resources lead to an 'outsourcing' of inclusion to the responsibility of a special staff group, the TAs, which in turn makes resources instruments of exclusion. This model is more than interesting to discuss.

Finally, grant solutions are missing; the findings converge on the demand for policymakers 'to consider rigorous reform', for example, to 'incentivise schools to be more inclusive'. However, the road there is long. Webster suggested some promising 'nano solutions' that aim at alternative social mixes in grouping to mitigate the harmful effects of streaming or recasting TAs' roles from replacing the teacher to scaffolding experts – initial points to break through the illustrated connection of resources and exclusion.

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Review 3:

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Rob Webster's book *The Inclusion Illusion* is both a timely and salutary read. Webster's argument is that schools, under the pressure of performativity, prioritise the education of what he describes as 'typically-developing pupils' and in effect operate a form of 'structural exclusion' against pupils with significant levels of SEND who attend mainstream classrooms. This exclusion stems from both a lack of meeting special educational needs with effective provision and a lack of clarity about what inclusion actually means. In many ways, this is a depressingly familiar story and historically policies and practices around SEND and inclusion in the United Kingdom have been complex and contested. Lloyd (2008) argued some years ago that 'the quest for inclusion through removing barriers to learning perpetuates deficit models of the child within an exclusive curriculum in which success is equated with achieving norm-related standards' (p.234). What makes this book so valuable is that Webster's argument is backed up by robust empirical research that documents the experiences of young people with SEND and acknowledges the continual financial, staffing and policy pressures faced by schools that have been exacerbated by the recent pandemic. The conception and practices of inclusive education in the United Kingdom have been marked by tensions and dilemmas between policy pressures on schools to perform well academically and policies designed to be genuinely inclusive of all learners (Norwich 2013, 2014). The 1978 Warnock Report made the case for integration and support for students with special educational needs (SEN) and the 1981 Education Act regulated important practices such as the establishment of SEN co-coordinators in schools. However, a discourse change towards inclusion rather than integration coincided with the 1988 Education Act that introduced a system of league table competition between schools driven by indices of attainment in national examinations. The educational culture of testing and league tables which followed the introduction of a national curriculum had little focus on the teaching and learning provision of special education for students with severe and profound learning difficulties. Even today, when successive governments issue guidelines regarding expectations of attainment for typically developing children, there are rather less clear expectations for all students with SEND who are working significantly below levels expected for their age. Webster's research shows that pupils with SEND are increasingly likely to receive pedagogical input from teaching assistants rather than qualified teachers and they are

frequently withdrawn from mainstream classes in what amount to an exclusionary educational experience.

Increased competition has led to perverse incentives for schools to follow exclusionary practices for pupils with SEND and with social, emotional and mental health needs in particular (Daniels et al., 2019; Thompson et al., 2021). This trend has been particularly marked in parts of England in contrast to the rest of the UK. For example, whilst permanent school exclusions rose dramatically in England before the pandemic they became increasingly rare in Scotland. It may be no accident that policy documentation around school culture in Scotland stresses the phrase 'relationships' in contrast to the emphasis on 'pupil behaviour' in England. Despite stated commitments to both accountability and inclusion over the past 20 years, the commitment to accountability in England appears to have overridden practices of inclusion (Daniels et al., 2019; Thompson et al., 2021). The introduction of Progress 8 as a measure of school accountability exemplifies this trend. Inclusion has been focused on integration and acceptance rather than access to equitable learning opportunities. In addition to equality of access, a lack of belonging has also been highlighted as one of the reasons behind persistent absences of SEMH students from school (Thompson et al. 2022). Tomlinson (2012) has described the 'SEN industry' of expanded alternative provision designed to provide provision for those who fall outside the standards agenda. Problems persist around uneven and discriminatory practices involved in both the characterisation and diagnosis of particular types of SEN. Tomlinson (2014) has long argued that some discriminatory practices of special education have avoided critique under a veneer of 'benevolent humanitarianism' (p.16). Webster's argument that schools need to work towards what he terms 'structural inclusion' is a welcome addition to the discourse on what constitutes real inclusion.

The conclusion of Webster's book touches on questions of what counts as research evidence that may be used to inform policy and judgements on practices of inclusion. The role of evidence, and how this is measured, has long been an issue of contention in educational research and this is particularly true for research that focuses on educational inequality and inclusion or exclusion in a period when the UK government favours an evidence-based or 'what works' research agenda to inform policy. Some of the debate around effective research methodologies to understand complex issues such as inclusion are unhelpfully polarised. For example, Webster makes the point that randomised controlled trials 'measure outcomes rather than experiences' and, as such, should not be critiqued as a methodology for not delivering what it was not designed to explore. However, the inclusion of SEND pupils has proved remarkably difficult to document and calibrate, not least because of difficulties in defining inclusion in a manner that reflects the experiences of SEND pupils in mainstream schools. A reliance on outcomes at the expense of experiences risks ignoring important variables such as school culture or policy interpretation. Evidence can only be evaluated within context, often within competing agendas and perverse incentives, and there is a need to go beyond a simple interrogation of the validity and reliability of the data.

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Review Response

Upgrading the policies and the politics of inclusion

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The commentaries from colleagues – to whom I am grateful for both taking the time to review *The Inclusion Illusion*¹ and their support for the ideas contained within it – offer reflections on the progress toward making mainstream schools more inclusive for children and young people with special education needs/disabilities (SEND).

Gerardo Echeita and Ian Thompson remark that policies of inclusion, often written in the idiom of ‘benevolent humanitarianism’ (Tomlinson, 1982), are weak, incomplete, lack coherence with and/or are deprioritised in relation to other aspects of school policy, or falter when implementation hits practical problems – some of which are predicted or predictable. The churn of inclusion policies, as well as what Sabine Weiss describes as the ‘yawning gulf between ambition and effects’ that each one tends to exhibit, surely contributes to the ‘growing resigned attitude’ Echeita detects among some advocates of full inclusion.

Indeed, while acknowledging the progress made toward inclusive education in the last two decades of the previous century, my fatigue with the stagnation that has followed in the first two decades of the present century is evident at points throughout *The*

Inclusion Illusion. Despite the social, moral, educational, economic and practical cases for inclusion, time and again, progress slows and stalls due to reasons that are chiefly political. With specific reference to the situation in England, the book's concluding sentence laments that 'inclusion remains a serious policy in search of a serious government willing to do what is necessary to implement it' (Webster 2022).

This indictment holds that the basic credibility and competency of the government in power is an essential factor in the delivery of an authentic and effective inclusive education system. Again, the situation in England is instructive in this regard.

In March 2023, the Conservative government published its SEND Improvement Plan, which outlines proposals 'to create a more inclusive *society*' [emphasis added] (gov.uk 2023a). This aim includes, and goes beyond, making schools more inclusive spaces. It views these new reforms as a way to catalyse wider changes to 'cultures, attitudes and environments'.

It is, the Plan claims, a vision that 'aligns with other key reforms underway across government'. Yet this jars with the actions and apparent intentions of key reforms that adopt an uncompromising and contradictory stance on defending the rights, lives, safety and prosperity of other vulnerable people and marginalised groups.

Take, for example, the government's effort to introduce new laws to not only deny refugees – a definition that includes unaccompanied children – who enter the UK on small boats from across the Channel from claiming asylum, but to 'remove' them 'to their home country or to a safe third country' 'as soon as reasonably practical' (gov.uk 2023b). The proposed legislation, which seeks to circumvent aspects of the European Convention on Human Rights, is the apotheosis of a sustained and hostile rhetoric on asylum seekers specifically and immigration more generally.

Like its contemporaries in some European countries (e.g. Brothers of Italy; France's National Rally; Sweden Democrats) and the Republican Party in the US, the UK Conservative Party has calculated that taking a vocal position against progressive – or, to use the preferred argot of the political right, 'woke' – ideas and ideals is a vote winner. Modern social conservatism excels in weaponizing issues, such as immigration and gender recognition, and its contribution to public policy discourse is often characterised by scapegoating, otherising, and in some cases, dehumanising disadvantaged or dispossessed people and populations.

Another feature of such right-wing administrations is an unwillingness or inability to convert their campaigning zeal into effective governance. Instead of resolving their animating causes via the policy process, they are parlayed into perpetual grievances to rehear in so-called 'culture wars'. And when these governments do draft legislation, it often seems deliberately designed to test the absolute limits of domestic law or international obligations, or to disrupt longstanding norms of decency and dignity. Their failure to 'get things done' is blamed on 'obstructions' (e.g. legitimate legal challenges) made by 'politically motivated' caucuses (e.g. unions), 'do-gooders' (e.g. activists) or 'unelected elites' (e.g. the judiciary).

It is important to say that the discourse on SEND and inclusion in the UK is nowhere near as heated or as high profile as the one on immigration. Nor does the SEND Improvement Plan have the same dangerous air of grandstanding performativity as the proposals to 'remove' refugees. That said, the disenfranchisement and discrimination built into elements of the UK government's current legislative slate (see also its positions on gender recognition and the use of voter ID) – plus its lukewarm commitment to addressing structural inequalities and institutional racism, misogyny and homophobia – is difficult to square with its ambition 'to create a more inclusive society' (gov.uk 2023a).

This is not the only central aim of the SEND Improvement Plan that invites scepticism. There is also the pledge to 'restore families' confidence' in the SEND system, which rather overlooks how the same government's previous and calamitous attempt to overhaul the system (2010–2015) is the principal reason why confidence now needs to be rebuilt. It is far from clear whether parents can be persuaded that the introduction of more accountability metrics are an adequate response to addressing the separation and segregation and the lower quality pedagogical diet that characterises the everyday educational experiences of pupils with SEND in mainstream schools, as described in *The Inclusion Illusion*.

Moreover, many parents and professionals will have trouble reconciling the Plan's claim to deliver 'a sustainable system set up for long-term success' with the spectacular turbulence of summer 2022. The fallout from events that saw the government burn through no fewer than five Secretary of States for Education in 122 days (one incumbent's tenure lasted just 36 hours), and three Prime Ministers in around half that time, will be fresh in their minds.

The case in England, therefore, reveals something of a public policy paradox. Reforms to make schools more inclusive are presented as an engine for transforming 'cultures, attitudes and environments' in wider society, by a government that is seemingly ignorant of its central role in the toxification of the same 'cultures, attitudes and environments' it seeks to improve, and unconcerned about the way its administrative incompetence undermines public trust in its sincerity and ability to deliver.

Public policy is the software that determines the parameters of change across society and within its institutions. Critics and citizens are right to interrogate it and to demand more from the politicians and policymakers that code it. Yet viewed in the context of the profound changes that democratic backsliding and the drift toward (and in some cases, the arrival at) right-wing authoritarianism have wrought on the operating system of government in territories across the world, it becomes clearer that both the politics and the policies of inclusion require a comprehensive upgrade.

Note

1. *The Inclusion Illusion. How Children with Special Educational Needs Experience Mainstream Schools* is available as an open access (free) download at:

<https://www.uclpress.co.uk/theinclusionillusion>

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