

Access for Disabled Students to Further and Higher Education: an Intersubjective and Dialogic Process

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Abstract

Inclusive education is a right for all students at all levels of education, including further and higher education. In this paper, I present an overview of key developments in inclusive education and its underlying principles, as they relate to disabled students. I then discuss the complexities involved in implementing these principles in practice, a discussion that leads to an argument for looking at inclusion through the lens of intersubjectivity. Using this concept, I then argue that educators and students (as key stakeholders) need to work together and with others to remove these barriers, taking into account each other's different perspectives and understanding inclusive education as an ongoing relational process based on firm principles which are at the same time practised flexibly in order to attend to the peculiarities of each individual situation. I next focus on research that sheds light on the practice of inclusion, especially the barriers that still exist in further and higher education. Finally, I refer to Freirean dialogic pedagogy as a potential guiding light to the practice of inclusive education.

Keywords: Inclusive education, disabled students, intersubjectivity, Freirean dialogic pedagogy

Key Developments in Inclusive Education

On an international level, inclusive education as a right for all students at all levels of education, was established in the Salamanca Statement in 1994 (UNESCO 1994) and subsequently also in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2006 (United Nations 2006). Malta is one of the many countries that have both signed the Salamanca Statement and ratified the CRPD, thus committing itself to implementing an inclusive education policy. In fact, it was in 1994 that the first learning support educators (LSEs), who were called facilitators at the time, were employed to support disabled children in mainstream schools (Spiteri, Borg, Callus, Cauchi and Sciberras 2005).

There were, of course, disabled students in mainstream education before that date, in Malta and elsewhere. For example, the late Gordon Cardona (2011), who was a disabled activist, describes how he attended mainstream schools – well before 1994. Regardless how welcome Gordon (and other disabled children) were made to feel in his school, what he was benefitting from, was integration, rather than inclusion. As Bartolo (2001) points out, while integration relates to fitting the student into the existing school system, inclusion is about adapting that system according to the needs of the student and attending to their individual educational needs. It is therefore important to note that the Salamanca Statement, the CRPD, and various national anti-discrimination disability laws such as our Equal Opportunities (Persons with Disability) Act (Laws of Malta 2000), do not simply re-state the right to education of students with disability, but affirm the right to *inclusive* education.

Article 24 of the CRPD states the following:

States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning

(United Nations 2006).

What ensues in this, the longest article of the CRPD, is a detailed framework of how education systems need to adapt to meet the individual educational needs of disabled students. There is a shift from placing responsibility on the disabled student to fit into the mainstream education system, to placing the onus on the education system to adapt itself to meet the student's individual educational needs. The question we therefore need to ask does not revolve around 'whether student A may be placed in mainstream education?' but rather, 'what does mainstream education need to do to accommodate student A's individual educational needs?' This shift in focus from the individual to the education system, reflects the shift discussed by Oliver (1996), from the medical model to the social model of disability; that is, from equating disability with impairment – and therefore seeking remedies only in terms of fixing that impairment – to recognising the part that society plays in creating disability.

To return to the CRPD, the Preamble recognizes:

that disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

(United Nations 2006; Preamble (e)).

It is worth noting that this is also the definition of disability in our Equal Opportunities (Persons with Disability) Act.

As the CRPD and anti-discrimination legislation hold, disabling barriers are removed through providing reasonable accommodation, returned to below. To a large extent, inclusive education concerns establishing the individual educational needs of disabled students and identifying and implementing measures to meet those needs, without compromising the educational institution's ability to fulfil its aims in delivering a quality education to all its students.

A complex process

Inclusion is a complex process. It is not a one-time measure which, when implemented correctly, ensures that all students are fully included regardless of their individual educational needs. This is precisely because those needs are *individual*. There are of course generic measures that contribute to the inclusion process – ensuring step-free access into a building, and lifts and accessible toilets within it; providing large-print versions of teaching and assessment material; allowing for extra time in exams; making arrangements for sign language interpreting and personal assistants and so on. However, there will often remain issues that cannot be addressed except through putting into place individualised arrangements. Unless we address these issues, what we purport to be inclusive education, will simply be enhanced integration. This is where reasonable accommodation comes in. Article 2 of the CRPD defines reasonable accommodation as

necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms

(United Nations 2006).

There are two perspectives that are taken into account here: the disabled person and the one who is obliged to make modifications and adjustments. In an educational context, this would be the disabled student and the educational institution (which includes lecturers, teaching assistants, members of the senior management team and education authorities – I am using 'educators' as a catch-all term for these different roles). For disabled students, the focus is on eliminating obstacles, breaking barriers, that stop them from enjoying and exercising their rights on an equal basis with other students. For educators, the focus is on finding a way of removing these obstacles and barriers without putting 'a disproportionate or undue burden' on them. It is educators that need to make changes and ultimately, it is disabled students' rights that must be upheld. Yet there is also room for discussion and negotiation to find a way of making changes and upholding rights that are reasonable. In fact, there

is a *need* for discussion and negotiation, not least because – as the definition of reasonable accommodation states – modifications and adjustments may be needed ‘in a particular case.’

Inclusion is also a complex process because of the many layers of interpretation involved. Regardless of the existing legislation and other policy documents, and of the progress registered in many countries in the implementation of an inclusive education policy (Academic Network of European Disability Experts 2018), what happens when a disabled student enters a mainstream educational institution is still affected by the attitudes of the educators in that institution and of policy makers, and by their subjective interpretation of how inclusion should take place. As Lindsay (2003) states, ‘Inclusion is the policy framework. What is at issue is the interpretation and implementation of inclusion in practice.’ (p.9)

More recently, de Beco (2017) has discussed how the subject of inclusive education is still a matter of debate and even controversy and resistance. On the basis that inclusive education is a right that the CRPD expects governments to progressively realise (as per Article 4(2)), he argues that,

only by redesigning the general education system step by step, and by improving social attitudes continuously but steadily, will the right to inclusive education finally be implemented. Inasmuch as education engenders a greater appreciation by all future adults of the richness of human diversity, establishing an ‘inclusive education system’ in such a step-wise manner will be the best way of overcoming the current opposition to its implementation.

(de Beco 2017, 16).

Inclusive education therefore calls for discussion and dialogue about what it means, who it is that is to be included, and how to include them. It also calls for this dialogue to be an ongoing process in order to ensure reflection on and evaluation of the steps that are taken. It also calls for dialogue amongst the different stakeholders – especially disabled students, parents, educators and policy makers. Since these are persons with their own perspective and subjectivity, the concept of intersubjectivity can provide a way forward for this dialogue to be effective.

Intersubjectivity

Intersubjectivity as a notion has been used in different ways in philosophy, psychology, sociology, and literary criticism. In philosophy, whether it is Husserl, or Levinas, or Merleau-Ponty, among others, who are dealing with the topic, however much they may disagree amongst each other on the concept, one of the areas of common agreement seems to be that we can never really know the other as well

as we know ourselves (Moran, 2000; Sanders 2014), to which Judith Butler (2005) would add that we are opaque even to our own selves.

Levin (1998) describes intersubjectivity as ‘the subject’s encounter with another subject’ (p.359). For the purpose of my argument, this is a very fitting description of the concept, because it makes us aware that the other is as much a subject as we are, and moves us as far away as possible from the dangers of solipsism to which, as Merleau-Ponty (2000) warns, we are all prey. The subject is capable of acting, of having an impact on their world, of exercising agency in their life. Each subject of course has their own perspectives and their own way of experiencing and interpreting the objective world around them. A solipsistic worldview stops there – what is important is only one’s subjectivity and perspective. Intersubjectivity, on the other hand, acknowledges that each person’s sense of self is formed relationally.

Wetherell and Maybin (1996) describe the relational view of the self, in terms of a Venn diagram. They argue that we tend to see ourselves and others as billiard balls – momentarily coming into contact with each other, influencing each other’s direction but not impinging on each other’s selves which are seen as ‘already constituted and contained entities’ (p.221). In a relational view of the self, the subject’s boundaries are permeable and are affected by the selves of the people one comes into contact with. Each self is represented by a circle which overlaps with others. Significantly, in these particular Venn diagrams, the circles representing the selves of others remain on the outer edges of the main circle, the one representing the person interacting with others. This is because a relational view of the self, obliterates neither the subject’s agency nor its constancy across time. It simply acknowledges that how the self and the subject develop and evolve, is partly contingent on the contact made with other selves and subjects.

But intersubjectivity requires us to go further. It requires us to acknowledge the Venn diagrams of other people as well, and our impact on them, while cautioning us not to assume that we know what those diagrams look like. Closely linked to intersubjectivity is empathy, as Husserl and Edith Stein (1998) tell us. Within inclusive education, being empathic towards fellow educators may be easier than being empathic towards disabled students. With the former, we have shared experiences, knowledge and perspectives that we may not easily share with the latter. Consequently, it is on the intersubjectivity between the educator and the disabled student that I will focus, in order to explain my argument that inclusive education is best seen as an ongoing relational process based on firm principles which are at the same time practised flexibly in order to attend to the peculiarities of each individual situation.

For the relational process between educators and students to be an effective and fruitful one, as educators we need to understand the perspectives of disabled students as fully as possible, and to present our own perspectives to them. We also need to keep in mind that this exchange of views happens in a context with

an inevitable imbalance in favour of educators. It is therefore incumbent on the latter to attend to the peculiarities of each individual disabled student's situation. Listening to what they have to say for themselves is crucial. Listening to disabled students also means upholding their participation rights, that is their right to make their voice heard and to be involved in decisions affecting them.

Although I am here focusing on young people in further and higher education, I want to turn for a while to younger students, the ones who are still in primary and secondary schools. In our book *The Disabled Child's Participation Rights*, Ruth Farrugia and I set out what these rights entail (Callus and Farrugia, 2016). We write that the disabled child's participation rights need to start by acknowledging them as subjects who can have an impact on their own lives through the exercise of their agency. Furthermore, recognizing the ability of the disabled child to participate in decision-making processes does not simply mean being aware of their capacity to do so. Ability to participate is not equivalent to innate capacity to do so, but arises from opportunities afforded to children. For the disabled student, it also entails being provided with the support they require to meet their impairment-related needs. Very importantly, upholding the disabled child's participation rights also involves appreciating the intrinsic worth of their perspectives and the insights that we can gain from them. Finally, the ability – and even the capacity – to participate in making decisions is one that needs to evolve. It is not just students' abilities that evolve, but also those of educators, who can become increasingly more adept at facilitating students' voices to be heard and at listening and acting upon what they have to say. The disabled student's competence to participate in decision-making processes is therefore something that needs to be discovered. It is not a static characteristic that can be measured or pre-established according to the age of the student. Participation in decision-making is dependent not only on the disabled student's competence, but on the competence and skills of educators and other adults to support the student in expressing their views.

When we do listen to a disabled student's voice, the knowledge we – as educators – gain, can help us support that student better. It can also help us become better and more inclusive educators. Insights obtained from one situation are used in others, as we absorb those insights and make them part of our practices, informing the approach to our work, and how we see the world.

Disabled students' voices

In this context, I will focus on some research which solicits the views of disabled students. As Miskovic and Gabel (2012) point out, research about inclusive education adopts a social model understanding of disability, in that it investigates the barriers within the education system encountered by disabled students. To these of course

we should add the investigation of enabling factors – that is, when inclusion works well, what factors contribute to this achievement?

I start with two studies carried out in Malta with primary and secondary schoolchildren respectively. When it is young children who are speaking, what they say is particularly worthy of attention – it is all too easy to underestimate how aware young disabled children are of what is going on in their life and how valid their opinions about that are.

In the presentation of her research with a young boy with physical disability – whom she calls Alexander – Psaila starts by quoting him. While she was playing with him, when carrying out the fieldwork for her research, Alexander pretended to be Psaila's teacher and told her,

We are going to do some classwork and for homework we are going to have the same as classwork. And you only have 29 minutes to finish it! OK? So you better get to work! (Alexander, age 7) (p.171).

This quotation is contrasted with one from his teacher and learning support assistant who say:

He is very laid back. He is dependent on having an adult prompt him all the time, and in group work, he allows others to take control. (Alexander's Teacher & Learning Support Assistant) (p.171)

As Psaila remarks, it is hard to believe that the teacher and learning support assistant are speaking about the boy who is so much in control in the teacher-student game that he had himself initiated.

Additionally, as Psaila reports in her article, one of the wishes that Alexander expressed to her, is that he would not use the lift at school on his own. When his class needs to go upstairs for some of the lessons, he wishes that some of his classmates would ride in the lift with him. That is a wish that cannot be hard to grant. It would place Alexander on a more equal level with the others – some students go up and down the stairs, others use the lift. However, no one would have thought it was an issue for Alexander. For most adults, the fact that the school has a lift and that Alexander is not missing out on lessons that take place upstairs is enough. It took Alexander to make us realise that using the lift on his own may include him academically but not socially.

Furthermore, Alexander could help us realise the importance of the social aspect of inclusive education once someone took the time to listen to what he had to say for himself. Psaila (2017) also makes the point that listening to what the disabled student has to say about their life can be time consuming.

The first step in making the disabled student's participation rights a reality, then, is for us to take time out of our busy schedule and our usual way of doing things, and stopping to listen to and learn from our students. When we do that, the results

yielded can be extremely insightful, even if sometimes challenging. Take for example this quotation by Gordon, a student with ADHD interviewed by Maria Camilleri:

if you are ADHD, you are always fidgeting with your uniform... the amount of times I got in trouble because of the uniform ... I got after schools, I got break in... I got in trouble because my shirt was not tucked in, my tie was not tight enough, and my buttons were not buttoned up correctly according to the great god of buttons (p.65).

It may be deceptively easy to dismiss Gordon's viewpoint – of course our teacherly instincts tell us that it is important for students to be smartly dressed and perhaps Gordon needs to understand why following the same dress code as his schoolmates is important. However, he cannot be expected to understand that, unless he is listened to, unless he is himself understood. If it is fidgeting that Gordon needs to pay attention to the teacher, a simple solution can be found by giving him alternatives that don't involve him ending up looking disheveled. As with Alexander, the issue cannot be sorted until someone takes the time out to listen to Gordon and dialogue with him.

To return to inclusion at a further and higher education level, research carried out in the United States, Hong (2015) identifies various contributing factors to effective inclusion, among them: the perceptions of the lecturers, the quality of the support services, the commitment of the student and their adjustment to a more independent learning style at this level and the extent to which they are included in both the academic as well as the social life of the educational institution. Other factors, identified by Moriña (2017) in her review of the research literature from various countries, are: support from the family and from peers and friends; support and encouragement from lecturers and other educational staff, as well as from specific disability support officials; having the necessary adjustments in place, including the provision of technology and software where applicable; and identifying the strategies that the students themselves develop throughout their years in formal education.

Atkins (2016) warns about the danger of assuming that our practices are fully inclusive and overlooking the more covert types of discrimination. In her article, she presents research conducted with Ollie and Tom, two British university students with severe physical disabilities. These two young men's experiences were positive on the whole. They did pinpoint, however, how they felt excluded from the social life on campus. Their remarks serve as important reminders that, in the same way that education is not only about gaining academic credentials, so too, inclusive education is not only about ensuring access to the curriculum, but also about creating an inclusive and welcoming ethos in different activities, facilities, and aspects of educational life. Nonetheless, even if we were to focus on the academic aspect only, there is still much to be done. As Hadjidakou and Hartas (2008) argue in their research on inclusion in higher education in Cyprus, it is not just a question

of installing ramps and allowing for extra time in examinations. Inclusive education also involves adapting teaching methodologies and proactively seeking to meet individual educational needs.

Reflecting on quotations from students in research about inclusion in further and higher education can yield very interesting results. There are responses where we can quite easily identify with what the disabled students say. For example, in Magnus and Tøssebro's study (2014), Elisabeth reports how a professor accepted to give her the lecture notes because she has cerebral palsy, but refused them to her course-mate who has dyslexia. We can sympathise with the students who, for instance, are refused what we would consider to be perfectly reasonable arrangements because, they are told, it would be too expensive to accommodate them. We can also see the reason why some students with hidden disabilities prefer not to disclose their conditions. When speaking about her friends, Eli, another student in Magnus and Tøssebro's research, feared these friends would redefine her if she told them about her impairment, '*I want them to know me as ME, and not ADHD-me*' (Magnus & Tøssebro 2014, p.322).

We can perhaps even empathise with Eli and understand why she did not want to be identified by her label. She adds,

After many years of struggling and tears, I finally have managed to keep friends. I have friends who do not know that I have ADHD, who look upon me as a normal person. It was so important for me

(Magnus & Tøssebro 2014, p.322).

In order for us as educators to truly empathise, we need to understand that when disabled students present themselves to us in a calm manner, they may be hiding many struggles and conflicts, with themselves and with others. Appreciating that this may be the case can go a long way towards our ability to understand their subjective positions.

Research carried out in Malta by Liliana Marić (2017) with disabled students in Further and Higher Education, emphasises just how important it is for educators to try and put themselves in their disabled students' shoes and appreciate how they experience their lives. Here are two very relevant quotations:

Sometimes it is lack of thought as when you are a normal person in inverted commas, certain thoughts won't cross your mind (Alessia)

(Marić 2017, p.266);

The word disability doesn't have to be a negative. People make it a negative. The person becomes defined by society. Basically, your status is according to how society decides it, not according to how you are as a person. A lot of progress is going on, but we still have a lot to achieve. We are different, but our differences should not result into discrimination (Marie)

(Marić 2017, pp.266-267).

Discrimination can thus occur without our even realizing it, as can practices which are exclusionary. The fact that awareness of disability and disabling practices are constructed by society is therefore also very important (Barnes & Mercer 2010). It is these practices that Alessia and Marie are referring to – from their own experience, they are aware that the problems that they face in education, as well as in wider society, do not arise directly and inevitably from their disability, but from the negativity that society itself attaches to disability.

Furthermore, as Hong (2015) observes, while educators can accept to provide the reasonable accommodation being requested, ‘one can never force empathy on another person’ (p.216). She then quotes one of the students who participated in her research:

Understanding is not something you can demand of someone with a piece of paper or even an explanation. The school may mandate to allow the students to be in their class and cater to their needs, but it is up to the individual teacher how it is interpreted. You can't force someone to be okay with giving accommodations. They'll still give them, but they may be snippy about it, look down on the student. This is the last thing I want. I'd rather deal with the repercussions of being a 'lazy' pupil than if the other option is being resentfully given help. (p.216)

We may read that quotation and mentally give ourselves a pat on the back, reassuring ourselves that we are not that type of lecturer, we are not condescending towards students with individual educational needs. Yet, what if we do come across as ‘snippy’, as this student puts it? On the other hand, what if our behaviour and attitude is misinterpreted by a student who, after years of various educators being condescending or even dismissive, assumes that these are the attitudes she may expect, and identify them as being the ones that she has learnt to read in the behaviour of educators? Her conclusion may be wrong, but we must appreciate the factors that led her to come to these conclusions.

From these, and many other studies about inclusion in further and higher education, we can conclude that inclusion is not an all or nothing affair. An educational institution is not completely inclusionary or completely exclusionary. It is rather a question of having varying degrees of inclusion in different aspects of education. Inclusion is therefore a process, and one in which we need to be continually attentive as to how we can make institutional and individual practices more inclusive. Furthermore, inclusive education is a complex affair. It entails attending to various factors within both the academic and the social side of things.

Most importantly, if our understanding of disability remains a medicalised one, and therefore one that seeks to, so to speak, fix the student’s impairment, then we cannot claim to be working within an inclusive education framework. In fact, we

would run the risk – as Graham and Slee (2008) argue – that we simply reinforce existing structures by tweaking the education system here and there, rather than really making it adapt to the individual educational needs of disabled students.

Conclusion: a Freirean approach to inclusion

It is to Freire's conception of education as dialogic, that I turn as a way for educators and students to work together towards creating an education system that is more effectively inclusive. Freirean pedagogy is useful not only in the lecture room, but within the educational institution as a whole, in terms of what we can learn from each other - in the context of my paper, what educators and disabled students can learn from each other. If this dialogue takes place within a framework of intersubjectivity, it means that we are also attentive to how we influence each other, how our actions impinge on others, and that we are alert to the need to be empathic with others on the one hand, and explain ourselves to them on the other.

Freire (1970) talks about the oppressor and the oppressed. Such language may be too harsh for the context I am considering here. It can most probably be safely assumed that most educators at any level of education do not go about oppressing disabled students with intent. Yet, if the opposite of oppression is liberation, and if the purpose of education is ultimately that of humanisation, we have most probably all been responsible at some point or other in our teaching careers for practices which, even if unintentionally, have been far from liberating and humanising, and therefore also far from being inclusive. We must also keep in mind that, regardless of how inclusive our educational practices may be, the balance of power in the educator-student dyad remains in favour of the former, as pointed out earlier. It is therefore up to us educators to ensure that power relations with disabled students are more equitable - without that equity there cannot really be a dialogue; without equity, a conversation is more likely to be mere exchange of information, with the educator determining what information to impart to the student and which pieces of information offered by the student can be considered as valid.

Roberts (2013: 20) identifies the dispositions that need to be adopted for a Freirean dialogue which, he argues, are 'inseparable from human virtues. These include humility, commitment, openness, hope, tolerance, and love.' They are also the dispositions needed for one to be empathic - having the humility to acknowledge that ours is not the only valid viewpoint, the commitment to doing our work well, having the openness to views and actions that challenge our way of doing things, hoping in being able to change things for the better, showing tolerance towards those whose actions and perspectives we find difficult to accept, and showing love, which should not need to be qualified or explained. Since this is a dialogue we are talking about, and therefore a two-way affair, we need to add the willingness to

discuss with students - why certain decisions have been taken, how they are taken, identify factors that are extraneous to their particular situation but which impinge on it, while evaluating what has worked in the past, what has not, and so on.

Freire (1970) tells us that, when there is oppression, it is not only the oppressed that are missing out on being able to affirm their human dignity. Even if we move away from the heavy language of oppression, and flip Freire's message, it still holds. Where there is inclusion, it is not only disabled students who benefit, but educators and anyone with a stake in the education system – which is just about everybody.

How can an intersubjective and dialogic approach help us achieve successful inclusion? First of all, if we see the borders of our selves as permeable, we realize how, as educators, our encounters with disabled students have an impact on us and change us, not only as professionals but also as human beings. These encounters shape our world view, impinge on our subjectivity and are eventually absorbed into our own sense of self.

Secondly, it is achieved by appreciating how those encounters have an impact on our students, and not only in our colleges and lecture rooms, but also in their lives, and on them as human beings, their subjectivity, their sense of self.

Thirdly, it is as Levin tells us – acknowledging that it is other subjects who are interacting with us, impinging on our sense of self and our subjectivity, thus avoiding slipping into the error of solipsism. We need to talk to each other because we can never know the other fully – especially to hear what students have to say about themselves and their situation, to explain our actions and discuss our decisions with them. An intersubjective and dialogic approach to inclusive education can help us avoid the mistake of thinking there are barriers where none exist, of unwittingly creating barriers ourselves, and identify the barriers that do exist and finding ways to break them.

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Bio-note

Dr Anne-Marie Callus is Senior Lecturer at the Department of Disability Studies, Faculty for Social Wellbeing, University of Malta and has worked in the disability sector in Wales and in Malta since 1994. She obtained her PhD at the Centre for Disability Studies, University of Leeds in 2011. Her research subject was the self-advocacy movement of people with intellectual disability in Malta. She has published on issues of rights and empowerment - especially for persons with intellectual disability, inclusive education and cultural representations of disability. Her recent publications include a book co-written with Dr Ruth Farrugia entitled *Disabled Children's Participation Rights* and the co-editing of a special issue of the Malta Review of Educational Research on disabled students' voices in inclusive education. Dr Callus is also the Head of the University of Malta's ACCESS Disability Support Unit. Recently, she was appointed on the Executive Editorial Board of the international journal *Disability & Society*, a leading journal in Disability Studies. From 2010 to 2013 she was the Executive Director of the National Commission Persons with Disability.