Equal is not Enough - Current Issues in Inclusive Education in the Eyes of Children

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Abstract

The sociology of childhood opens up new perspectives on inclusive practices, as it considers children themselves as actors in their environment. The author aims at expanding this notion to children with special educational needs whose agency often goes unrecognized. At first, this article will clarify notions of inclusive education and special educational needs, and then analyze children's agency by using two case studies involving children with special educational needs in France and Germany. The qualitative research methodology (sociometric surveys and semi-directed interviews) gives priority to children's viewpoints with and without special educational needs. The two cases reveal how two children with special needs deal with risks of stigmatization and exclusionary practices in the inclusive setting. An important outcome of the study is that children are able to consider their own social status in the class, and that they adapt to challenges imposed on them by institutional structures and/or other persons. It also reveals that these children may contradict the adults' viewpoints on their inclusion. Research in inclusive education needs to recognize the children's perspective in order to improve the quality of inclusive practices in classrooms and in educational policies.

Keywords: inclusive education, sociology of childhood, children's agency, special educational needs, disability, case study , Germany,   France

The history of the study of childhood in the social sciences has been marked not by an absence of interest in children […] but by their silence. (Prout & James, 1997, p. 7)

1. Sociology of childhood and children with special educational needs

For a long time, research in education consisted of research about educational institutions, about equal opportunities, and about professionals working in the educational sector, but it is as if the viewpoint of the main individuals concerned – the children themselves – has been forgotten in this research.

For some sociologists, this viewpoint has opened up a field called "terra incognita" (Sirota, 1998, p. 10). Sociology of childhood marks a turning-point in this situation and constructs a new paradigm that understands childhood as a "social construction" (ibid., p. 8). Prout and James (1997, p. 8) postulate that

"Children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concerns of adults", and that

"Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes."

Childhood has for a long time been considered as a stage of development on the way to adulthood. Corsaro (2005, p. 23) calls this "a linear view of the developmental process. In the linear view, it is assumed that the child must pass through a preparatory period in childhood before he or she can develop into a socially competent adult." This viewpoint shows how much children are considered as persons who have not yet matured and who need to be socialized by the corresponding educational institutions. Children experts claim to know what kind of treatment is advantageous for them.

This perspective turns out to be even more interpellant once we are focussing on the sector of special education and the children who have special needs. As these children are already considered to be below normal development in mental or physical terms, their achievement of "normal adulthood" is very unlikely. It seems as if their silence is even "louder" than those of children not having special needs. Around the children with special needs, many experts are circulating that are talking not only in the children's place, but also in the parents' place. Research started only recently to be interested in disabled persons as actors in their own lives. This is especially evident in the "Life as a disabled child"–study (Watson, Shakespeare, Cunningham-Burley, Barnes, Corker, Davis, & Priestley, 1999) that took the perspective of children with special needs into account by conducting in-depth-interviews with them about their social situation inside special and mainstream schools. The outcomes of these studies show that this neglected perspective of children reveals surprising insights into disabled children's lives that adult experts are not able to consider. Pitt and Curtin (2004) take the same approach in order to explore the perspective of adolescents with disabilities about inclusive and segregated schooling. From the biographical perspective, Dorothy Atkinson

(2004) involves persons with learning disabilities in oral and life history research in order to reconstitute their past in special educational institutions. These witnesses reveal a treasure of experience and perspectives that is likely to disrupt common representations about disabled persons and their lives.

The present article will follow this path of considering children with special educational needs as actors in their own lives and to reveal current problems of inclusion into mainstream schools from the children's representations. The author will therefore introduce two cases from two different European contexts: one child from Germany and one child from France.

In this article, the author chose to use the term "child with special educational needs" because it seems to fit best the two case studies presented below. This definition comes from the Warnock Report (1978) in the United Kingdom and focuses on the needs that children may have and not on their deficiency. Today, it is in use on the international level, particularly in the publications of the OECD (e.g. 2004; 2005) and it tries to resume all types of special needs, from children with disabilities, those with a difficult social background or those with behavioural challenges. The population is split into three cross-national categories: A: Disabilities; B: Difficulties; C: Disadvantages. As one can see, these categories of special educational needs include more children than only the "classical" group of children with disabilities. Even if this term does not include the social dimension of disability and still has a focus on a medical approach of the phenomenon (also see critical remarks on the notion by Plaisance 2000, p. 25-27), it appears to be the most appropriate term to characterize the population concerned by this research.

2. Comparing integration, inclusion and "common instruction"

In the beginning, it seems important to highlight important notions in the field of integrative or inclusive education. These last years, the notion of inclusion - especially since the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) has taken more and more space in the vocabulary of the international discussion about children with special educational needs. As these two notions are very often used in the same sense, a clarification becomes necessary. The underlying ideas of the two notions are different. Hinz (2002, p. 359) elaborates a chart showing a clear difference between both conceptions (cf. table I).

It is important to notice that inclusion contains a very radical idea of diversity which is not found in the idea of integration. Using the term inclusion implies changes in the educational system, leaving the idea of homogeneity as an illusion behind.

In the German practices there exists a third conception called "common instruction" (*Gemeinsamer Unterricht*). It means that special education and mainstream education are put together: teachers are teaching together and children are learning together. Everybody's knowledge is contributing to the organisation of the class. The children with special needs can dispose of special support like special teachers, special curricula and material, accessibility and therapy inside the school if necessary. This conception can be considered

being in between integration and inclusion, being more overt to diversity, but still hanging on to the definition of two different groups: with or without special needs.

Table I: Differences between integrative and inclusive practices

Integrative practice	Inclusive practice
▪ Integration of children with special needs in the mainstream school	▪ Living and learning together (all children at the mainstream school)
▪ Differentiating system depending on the type of disability	▪ Inclusive system for everybody
▪ Two-group-theory (disabled – not disabled; with or without special needs)	▪ Theory of heterogeneous group (different minorities and majorities)
▪ Reception of disabled children	▪ Changing of the schooling idea
▪ Theoretical approach centered on the individual	▪ Consideration of all levels (emotional, social, educational)
▪ Resources for labeled children	▪ Resources for the entire school
▪ Special support for disabled children	▪ Common and individual learning
▪ One individual curriculum for one child	▪ One individualized curriculum for every child
▪ Individual projects for disabled children	▪ Engagement into reflection and planning of all participants
▪ Special teacher supporting children with special needs	▪ Special teacher supporting teachers, classes and schools
▪ Special education influencing mainstream school methods	▪ Changing all educational practices (mainstream and special practices)
▪ Controlled by experts	▪ Teamwork

(Cf. Hinz, 2002, p. 359, translation by C. Schneider)

In the following, the author will use the terminology of inclusive education/inclusion, even if it does not necessarily reflect the very idealistic definition reflected in table I, as it seems currently to be the most frequently used notion in international debates.

3. Recognition of diversity

Teaching heterogeneous groups obviously involves recognizing diversity inside the classroom. In a less abstract way, children with special needs are experiencing recognition (or misrecognition) inside their classroom, by their teachers or by their classmates. Honneth (1996) shows that recognition can be situated on three levels: love/affection – rights – solidarity. Every human being needs recognition at these three levels in order to feel accepted in his/her human condition. It makes clear that the right to education, accorded so many times by official political declaration made by the UN or other national organisations is a part of recognition, but that it is not enough for any human being. Thinking about the inclusion of children with special needs, it becomes obvious that the recognition of these children in their

right to inclusion is just a kind of "technical" condition as to what will later happen inside the classroom and the school community. It is obviously not enough to respect equal rights. We have to wonder if, and how, these children are recognized by their classmates and their teachers. As social integration should be one of the outcomes of these practices (cf. Guralnick, 2001, p. 30, Note 1), we may ask how they can become recognized members of society. Evidently, at this point, Honneth's theory of recognition, the paradigm of sociology of childhood and the conception of inclusion are converging: recognizing all children as active members of society, considering their point of view as important in everyday life and research. As Chauvière and Plaisance (2008, p. 44) put it, the inclusion of persons with disabilities marks the return of the subject and the qualitative question. In the following, two case studies about children with special needs in France and in Germany will reveal the importance of this new orientation and give new insights about integrative/inclusive practice inside classrooms in the eyes of children.

4. Methodology

The author followed the development of peer relationships in classes integrating children with special needs over one school year (October 2003 to June 2004). The two individual cases presented in this article are from two classes out of eleven observed within a wider study (Schneider 2006). The focus was on the children's peer relationships and on their status inside the social network. According to the conceptual framework of the sociology of childhood, the children were in the centre of this research. The first method used for examining the classroom situation was sociometric questionnaires in order to reveal the structure of the relationships amongst the children (cf. Parlebas, 1992). These surveys completed in the classroom asked the children to name their best friends, their favorite neighbors in class, the ones they do not like to sit with, who they have conflicts with, and who they prefer to play with during recess and outside of school. In a second step, the investigator conducted interviews with selected children in order to clarify the reasons of their choices and to find out about their status inside the class. This step aimed at understanding the sense the children attribute to their presence inside the classroom. These methods were applied three times throughout the school year in order to observe possible evolution in the relational network. Additionally, the classroom teachers were interviewed at the end of the school year about their perspective of the social integration of the children with special needs. These additional interviews did not shift the focus from the children to the adults, but gave valuable additional insights into the life of the class, as the investigator was not continuously present throughout the school year. It is also important to note that the children participating in the research did not know that the main concern was about peer relationships in inclusive settings, as the author wanted to avoid a "politically correct" picture of the situation of children with special needs in mainstream settings. The children were only informed about the investigator's general interest in their peer relationships.

5. Sébastien

Sébastien is an eight-year-old boy having a *hemiplegia* since birth. Since the beginning of the school year, he has attended a primary school in the east of Paris that was once an experimental public school, classified today again as an ordinary school. The goal of the experimental period was to find methods to fight against school failure. As this school continued to rely on successful alternative pedagogical methods from the experimental school period, he was in a class that consisted of two-age-levels (3rd and 4th grade), learning together in one classroom. The school's philosophy is to be open to diversity. Sébastien received special support from therapists who were partially doing their work inside the school in the forms of physiotherapy and ergotherapy. For supporting his learning process (due to his *hemiplegia*, he is very slow in handwriting), he has a laptop at this disposal and the ergotherapist is instructing him in its use.

According to the three series of sociometric questionnaires (that all 22 students member of the class had filled out), Sébastien's integration into the classroom community was slow but steady. The first results in November showed that he did not yet have any friends and that he did not consider anyone as his friend. On the opposite hand, he was rejected by three of his classmates who said they would not like to sit beside him inside the classroom. In the second sociogram, two children chose him as one of their best friends and he was only rejected by one other child. He identified two children as being his friends. Finally, at the end of the year, according to the questionnaires, he had acquired three friends, and considered himself as having two, which corresponds to the class average of having 3 to 4 friends. It appears that his relationships with several of his classmates have stabilized throughout the school year.

Despite this positive development, Sébastien was not completely satisfied about his friendships, talking in the interviews nostalgically about the school he went to the year before. In his mind, at the former school, he built new friendships more quickly and he expresses the idea that it takes a lot at the current school to make new friends. He says that he would rather return to his former school, but that this is not possible, as his father made a lot of effort to get him accepted in his new school.(Note 2)

> Sébastien: I don't have a choice, I have to stay in this school. […] the thing is, too, that my father made a lot of efforts to make me change school, so, now… […] so he did all this, my dad, and I can't… before, I was thinking, this school there is really cool, you know. Now, I go here, I try to make an effort to like it, and finally, I am making efforts, afterwards, I stop making efforts and I say that I don't like this school. That's it.
> Cornelia Schneider: And you told this to your parents?
>
> S: Right now, I start to like it, but… I will try to get used to it in order… in order to please my father so that he didn't change, that he didn't do all this for nothing.

5.1 From special support to stigma

Concerning his laptop, one can observe a very particular development during the school year: This instrument, meant to be a support for Sébastien's school work to compensate for his physical disability in comparison to his classmates, becomes a stigma (Goffman, 1963; Link

& Phelan, 2001) to him. At the beginning of the school year, he was using the computer very often. He explained to me that it was not possible for him to have a neighbour at his table due to the laptop that takes up a lot of space. He also admitted that his classmates were not really able to understand the use of this tool:

> Sébastien: Actually, when I had the laptop, they said: hey, why does he have a laptop? And Natacha [his teacher] did not know how to explain.
> Cornelia Schneider: And you, did you know?
> S: Well, no.
> CS: So what did she answer?
> S: Well, she said that this is special, because he, I am not able to write fast and that's why I have a laptop.
> CS: And did they understand?
> S: Well, I think so. But they are still all the time looking at my computer.
> CS: Are they jealous?
> S: Yes, maybe. But I am still writing on paper, too. But if I am writing a big text, I am using the computer. But if am calculating in mathematics or if I am just doing a short text, I am writing like that.

Furthermore, his teacher Natacha told me that she considers this laptop as Sébastien's workbook that no other child had the right to use.

During the year, in his own words, he said he used the laptop less and less and developed, at the same time, mnemonic techniques in order to compensate for his disability. He also recognized the possibility that he could have a neighbor at his table once he no longer used the laptop.

Obviously, the computer that was supposed to help his integration into a mainstream classroom turned out to be a stigma for him. It hindered Sébastien from both making friends and having a table neighbour inside the classroom. Besides, the laptop makes his disability visible. Although Sébastien has a hemiplegia, it is hardly obvious to persons who do not know him. By using the laptop, it becomes more visible and he is not able to hide it away anymore. He becomes a "discreditable person" (Goffman, 1963, p. 57) who can no longer control the information about his disability. This example reveals the negative side effect of the use of special support inside mainstream classes and shows the social construction of stigma as a relationship between an attribute, the computer, and a stereotype of his impairment (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 366). The use of these tools or the presence of special teachers must address how to avoid stigmatising effects amongst the children. Watson et al. (1999) have proven that the same adults who are supposed to facilitate the inclusion of children with disabilities may instead hinder their peer relationships.

5.2 From stigma to recognition

At the end of the school year, the interview with his teacher Natacha shows how this stigmatizing effect could have been appeased, respectively avoided. At the end of the year, a computer virus paralysed every computer inside the school but one: Sébastien's laptop. In this

situation where urgent work was to be done on the computer, his teacher gave up her extreme position that excluded any use of the computer by someone other than Sébastien.

> Natacha: […] well, so I asked Sébastien if we could borrow his computer in order to write the record of the school council. He accepted and he even went looking after them, in order to type on the computer.

The school community desperately needed Sébastien's involvement, so that the school routines could continue to work. He and his computer became essential to the community, which enhanced Sébastien's status as a member of it. He experienced recognition as a member of society (Honneth, 1996) and obtained a different position: he was no longer the person that only needed the help of others. At that moment, his contribution was required and nobody else could replace him. His case also shows how the meaning of a particular object can shift from one extreme to another – from a stigmatized object to a desired one.

6. Prisca

Prisca is a ten-year-old girl with a learning disability. Her parents are from Greece, but she speaks German without any Greek accent, as she grew up in Germany. She is attending public primary school in Cologne, Germany, in the city centre. Her school has a long tradition of integrating children with special needs, working in the German tradition of *common instruction*. There are two more children with special needs in her class, Verena and Karl, both having learning disabilities as well. The school practices alternative learning and teaching methods (e.g. Freinet-pedagogy), recognizing diversity as a positive element in school life. According to this philosophy, the classes are composed of four different age-levels (1st to 4th grade). Thus, in Prisca's class, 23 students age 6 to 11 are learning together. Every class of this school is composed in the same way, accommodating different ages, nationalities, learning levels and social classes. A special education teacher works part-time in the class with the children.

Prisca has been included in this class from the very beginning, since she started school in first grade. She has had the same class teacher over all four years, the children are growing up together as a community (the oldest are leaving after 4th grade while new 1st-graders are joining the class). She is an active member of the class having friends and taking responsibilities for the class community. She supports younger children that are arriving in the class and she helps them to become familiar with the habits of the class.

The sociograms partially reflect this position, because she seems to be what Corsaro calls a "controversial child" (2005, p. 185-186), having a big influence on the class, being "active, enthusiastic and humorous" (ibid., p. 185), but also having changing peer relationships. In the sociograms made within the class, Prisca rose from one friend in the first questionnaire to seven friends in the second before falling back down to one in the final survey. She is a part of the network but her peer relationships appear to be complex. In the course of the school year, she and some other girls found a dancing group that practiced during recess and she was

very happy to belong to this group. At that time, the number of her friendships was at the highest level (seven children) of the school year.

6.1 Continuity of inclusive education

This very positive development appears to be undermined by the question of what school Prisca will attend once the primary school ends. In Germany, primary school ends earlier than in most other countries, (generally after 4th grade) and the tracking system is very selective. It is rare that secondary schools have the same funding as these primary schools to include children with special needs. Thus, the discussion about what type of school Prisca should attend was an ongoing process, which is reflected in her interviews. Finally, staff, in consultation with the parents, decided to enroll her in a special school for learning disabilities. Prisca has been following the discussion about her future secondary school with some anxiousness, as she would like to remain with her friends Katja, Annemarie and Verena.(Note, 3)

> Prisca: this is Verena's and Annemarie's wish that we are in one school where we are not so alone, but together.

Once the decision is final, Prisca expressed in the following interview her disappointment about being separated from her friends and not continuing in the mainstream school system, but she tries to convince herself that it is for the best. She tried to adopt the point of view of her teachers:

> P: But I also know that, right now, I am still a little bit sad, I only know that it is a school that maybe could make me better. And that the teachers there are better at explaining, at High School, they are explaining too fast, and the other children are able to understand and I am not. That's why… […] but I might get a degree, because Mrs. K. [her special education teacher] and Mrs F. [her class teacher] told me that.

Her friend Annemarie was also not happy about this decision. She would have preferred that Prisca could finally attend mainstream school, even one year later. As she was used to attend an inclusive school, Annemarie had difficulties finding the word for the school Prisca would attend:

> Annemarie: Verena will go to Main School and Prisca … how do they call it? Special school. But I thought that it would have been better if she waited another year, in order to go to Main School, too. That would have been better.

Annemarie knows that Prisca was unhappy about this decision and she tried to comfort her in her grief.

> A: She said, I think this is totally unfair, and so I said, Prisca, maybe your mother can tell Mrs. F that you should wait for one more year so that you can be able to go to Main School.

"Children enter into a social nexus and, through interaction with others, establish social understanding that become fundamental social knowledge on which they build continually" (Corsaro, 1992, 161). The interview excerpts show how the two girls are trying to find ways to change the decision, to weigh options. It becomes obvious how the adults' influence and the structural problems of inclusive education in Germany silences the children's viewpoint.

Questioning her teacher about this decision, her class teacher Mrs. F. regrets that there are not enough schools working with "common instruction" in order to continue Prisca's inclusion in a regular secondary school. She would have liked to have seen Prisca continue in an inclusive setting, but the lack of places did not leave them with many choices. She states that even the special teacher that came to the school observing her in order to write an assessment about Prisca's orientation recognized her high involvement in the class. On the other hand, Mrs. F thinks that Prisca is enthusiastic about her future school and that she asked many questions. From her perspective, it was more the parents' issue to accept the enrolment decision for their child rather than the child herself. Prisca's and Annemarie's statements contradict her belief.

7. Discussion

Using the framework of sociology of childhood, the cases of Sébastien and Prisca reveal inclusion in mainstream schools in the eyes of children and make obvious the risk of stigmatisation and structural problems of inclusive education. The interviews clearly show that children are actors in their environment and that they are able to contribute to the assessment of their education, even children with special needs like Prisca and Sébastien. In this context, Corsaro (1992; 2005) employs the term "interpretive reproduction", meaning that children are exposed to the same societal forces as adults, but that they are coconstructing their childhood with the elements at their disposal. "Interpretive reproduction reflects children's evolving membership in their culture, which begins in the family and spirals outward as children create a series of embedded peer cultures based on the institutional structure of the adult culture" (Corsaro, 2005, p. 44). It is very important to emphasise this fact, as the domain of disability and special education seems to be "full of adult experts" – paediatricians, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, special teachers – who are always talking and advocating on behalf of the subjects. Despite their presence, the children are constructing their own way to deal with the situation. Sébastien himself develops different techniques and strategies in order to be part of the peer culture in his class, such as avoiding his computer. Prisca slowly adapts to the perspective of being excluded from the mainstream school system by discussing the issue with her friends. This occurs inside the formal structure of the classroom without the knowledge of the adults. Obviously, these outcomes open up new research fields to discover and explore. They will eventually require a deeper reflection about which research methods are adapted to the situation of these children. In the case of Sébastien and Prisca, access to the spoken word was not difficult, but other children may not have this facility. Köbberling & Schley (2000) utilize visual and tactile materials to support the interview process with children and adolescents with Down-Syndrom.

Goode (2003) employs ethnomethodology in order to approach children that are both deaf-mute and blind in order to give them a "voice".

Obviously, these two case studies refer to very specific situations in a German and a French classroom, and the question of how to generalize these two cases may be asked. As Flyvbjerg (2006, p. 226) puts it, "the strategic choice of case may greatly add to the generalizability of a case study". The two cases present elements that occur frequently in inclusive education: risks of stigmatization and the continuity of inclusion beyond the elementary level. On the secondary school level, numbers of students with special needs included in the mainstream classrooms drop significantly. Thus, these two cases appear to be "critical cases" (ibid., p. 230) because of the situations that they describe and because of the children's agency that they reveal.

8. Outcomes for further inclusive practice

Besides the outcomes for research by discovering the "terra incognita" of childhood (Sirota, 1998), this approach offers in a certain way empowerment to children with special needs to say for themselves what they need and give sense to their present. These interviews can enable these children to develop awareness that can be empowering for them (cf. Atkinson, 2004, p. 691-692).

In conclusion, these cases brought to light current problems of inclusive practice in today's schools: the problem of recognition and of continuity. The illusion of treating children with special needs just as equally as other children is obviously not enough. Including these children into mainstream settings requires more than just offering them a seat inside the classroom. Corbett (2001, p. 58). speaks in this context about the "Dump and hope-model" of inclusive education. Problems of rejection or disdain may occur; children amongst themselves may not always be very tender with each other. Obviously, these problems do not only concern children with special needs, but may also happen to others who are perceived as outsiders in classes. If they feel concerned, teachers have a hard time coping with this phenomenon.

Hence, the cases of Sébastien and Prisca are very particular, because they are children with special needs who, basically, are experiencing positive relationships in their classrooms, disposing of special support and having friends. In comparison to others, their situation is not dramatic. Going beyond the superficial, the results of closer observation reveal that their situation is more complex than first understood.

Finally, these results question certain practices inside and around the classroom situation: how to avoid stigmatising processes and how to create an educational system that is more oriented to inclusion the way it was introduced by Hinz (2002). Sociology of childhood shows a way to include the main actors into this ongoing reforming process. But even sociologists of childhood need to be aware of their own biases and assumptions about childhood and disabilities in order to gain valuable access to children's worlds and not to

ignore what children really have to say.

"Sociologists need to find a relationship to both children's own activity and to the social processes which shape and constrain children's lives but in which they themselves are not necessarily involved" (Prout & James, 1997, p. 30).

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Notes

1：Guralnick defines four goals of inclusion: access, feasibility, developmental and social

outcomes, social integration

2：The following quotations of interviews have been translated from French to English by Cornelia Schneider.

3：The following quotations of interviews have been translated from German to English by Cornelia Schneider.