Redirecting our gaze: Inclusion for the future or inclusion as a pedagogical experience in the present

Morten Timmermann Korsgaard & Stig Skov Mortensen

During the course of the development of inclusive education, from critical and emancipatory theory and practice to mainstream policy concept, a significant shift in emphasis has taken place. From exposing exclusionary and discriminatory practices for children and people with various difficulties in pedagogical experiences, we have seen an increased focus on inclusion as a political aim in line with aims of increased production and growth (Korsgaard 2016; Korsgaard & Mortensen, 2017; Slee, 2011). This represents a shift in focus from concrete pedagogical experiences and the origins of discrimination and exclusion, to a focus on inclusion as a desired outcome and output of pedagogical practice.

The political aim of achieving inclusion was of course also present in the original formulations of inclusive education, the difference, as we shall see, is that in present political discourses there is a disconnect between actual pedagogical experience and policy agenda, which is often expressed in numbers and followed by so called evidence-based methods. To put it in other words, the focus of the dominant gaze has shifted from the present to the future, and in turn, inclusive educational policy is aligned with labour and social policy. This shift mirrors a the shift that has taken place in most areas of pedagogical research and practice towards a gaze that is firmly fixed on the future. What kind of future are we heading for, and how do we shape schools to be more responsive to this future? How do we prepare (all) our children for it? In this talk, we will investigate what a distinction between the two abovementioned forms of pedagogical gazes might contribute to the discussion of how we can frame inclusion in pedagogical experiences.

The future has of course always played a significant role in pedagogical thinking. One might ask: what are we educating for if not the future? However, as Arendt emphatically reminded us in ‘The Crisis in Education’: “We destroy everything if we so try to control the new that we, the old, can dictate how it will look” (2006, p. 189). The paradox of educating for a future, which is not ours but belongs to our children, is something that pedagogical theory has been trying to overcome for centuries. However, perhaps it is in the very nature of pedagogical relations, that they are the realisation of this very paradox and education can only live with - and in the tension of - this paradox.

The paradox is thus not something to be overcome, but rather something that constitutes what is pedagogical. In this sense, pedagogical practice and theory concern the creation of a gap between past and future in which the mediation between the old and the new can take place (Masschelein & Simons 2015, p. 88) and in which we can live with(in) the paradox. Inclusion as a political concept and the fate of inclusive education as once an emancipatory and critical project and now a distinctly politicised project (Korsgaard 2016; Slee 2011) shows how our increasing fixation on the future in pedagogical thinking is also an attempt to overcome the paradox.
In order to exemplify what we understand this fixation on the future to entail, we will briefly describe a few recent developments in Danish educational policy. These developments seem to be fuelled by a general fear of the future. Most Danish educational policies in recent years have centred around the task of securing the welfare state in a time of globalisation, making sure schools provide the right type of citizens for an unknown future, and - most notably – that schools fulfil the fundamental task of battling social heritage and of not ‘leaving anyone behind’. This has led to inclusion being understood in terms of labour policy or social policy rather than as a pedagogical endeavour. On a practical level, this has led to what we perceive as a gross neglect of both pedagogical and ethical considerations.

This is evident in the ‘inclusion reform’ from 2012, which states that by 2015 at least 96% of all children should be included in regular school classes.\(^1\) One of the key elements of the reform was economic in the form of reduced funding for special schools (de facto closing many of them) and an increase in the ‘amount and severity’ of special needs necessary for obtaining assistance in one form or another. These economic incentives for ‘inclusion’ have led to enormous frustration on the part of teachers and caregivers. The aim of inclusion leads increasingly to children being ‘shifted around the educational chessboard’ (Graham & Slee, 2008, p. 278) and new forms of exclusion within the normal school system.

In the following, we will focus on pedagogical experiences of inclusion from an altogether different vantage point. This vantage point is derived from the first\(^2\) of four criteria for pedagogy that Wolfgang Klafki presented in his 1971 article ‘Erziehungswissenschaft als kritisch-konstruktive Theorie: Hermeneutik – Empirie – Ideologiekritik’. In this text, Klafki states that concerning pedagogical thinking and practice we cannot draw a definitive line between theory and practice. Rather theory and practice are intertwined and connected through the demand that pedagogical theory must always connect with the vantage point of the educator. Here however, we wish to widen the definition somewhat, and point to the pedagogical relation and to what constitutes a pedagogical experience, rather than the singular perspective of the teacher.

We might add that a gaze that is firmly fixed on the future does not adhere to this demand. Such a gaze is focused on what the pedagogical experience can contribute or provide; be it in the form of political objectives, economic growth or individual achievement. Pedagogical experience in the way that we wish to frame it, points to something very different. It points to the experience of being caught in the gap between a past and a future—and being presented with the possibility of becoming part of a common and shared world. Before turning to this conceptualisation of an inclusive pedagogical experience, a few words on the pedagogical framework are perhaps called for.

Klafki in the aforementioned article attempted to outline how we might conceive of pedagogy as a discipline in its own right. A discipline with criteria that emanate from the practice - and thinking - of pedagogical experience and relations, and how these have developed over time (Klafki, 1971, p. 356). The four criteria are: (1) pedagogical theory and practice cannot be

---

\(^1\) Read more on home page of the ministry: https://uvm.dk/folkeskolen/laerings-og-laeringsmiljo/inklusion/

\(^2\) The second criteria on a relative autonomy of education is also relevant for this discussion but it will not be expanded upon here.
meaningfully separated, (2) pedagogy has achieved and must have a relative autonomy from religious, political and other scientific influences, (3) pedagogy is a historically conditioned discipline, and (4) pedagogical thinking is a hermeneutical practice. For Klafki, these four criteria or characteristics of pedagogy provide a platform for conceptualising how we can think about and practice pedagogy. They function as theoretical demarcations as well as foundations upon which we can stand in the face of increased pressure on pedagogy to conform to political and societal pressure.

The idea that pedagogical thinking and theory should be inextricably connected to and rooted in the pedagogical experience turns our gaze away from the future and external justification and towards what is at stake in the encounter and relation between a teacher and a group of children. In a small-scale study we conducted in a series of communities of inquiry with teachers and pedagogues in Copenhagen, the way in which the pedagogues and teachers spoke about their experiences of inclusion all seemed to point to specific forms of pedagogical experiences. In these moments a resonance between the children, the teacher and the material at hand in the encounter occurred and was allowed to control the course of the lesson (Korsgaard et al. 2017). Put differently, these encounters occasioned the children to be attentive towards and interested in the object and activity at hand.

In these moments, it seemed to the teachers that the difficulties and problems faced by the individual child and the group for a moment became insignificant. Not because the hitherto “excluded” child was now suddenly included for good and any difficulties disappeared, but because in that moment schooling was able to happen and the children were drawn into the activity. Drawing children into the activity, making them attentive towards the subject matter and offering them the possibility of becoming interested describes the pedagogical experience of being included in what schooling is about. This experience cannot be reconfigured or recalibrated into outcome or output, but is an everyday experience open to all children and teachers, albeit at times exceedingly hard to achieve. The question is whether the increasing pressure on teachers and researcher to have their gaze fixed on the future is rendering these experiences even harder to achieve.

In conclusion, we argue that the fixation on the future in many ways is counterproductive for inclusion as pedagogical experience. For us, inclusion in a pedagogical sense deals with the possibility of becoming attentive and interested in something that is at hand, something we can study by directing our gaze towards it in a particular moment. These experiences of being a part of a collective undertaking of schooling, is currently overshadowed by policies that are fixated on the future and on creating a future that it is not ours to determine in advance.

As Sharon Todd once put it at this very conference: “Educationally speaking, the question that I think deserves to be addressed is how do we reframe our attention so that the here and now matters? How can we live with the uncertainty that students might not become ‘what’ we ask them to be?” (Todd, 2010, p. 4). In this sense, the political gaze should turn towards fixing the present political, environmental and societal concerns, of which there are plenty, allowing in turn the pedagogical gaze to return its focus towards the present moment and towards the task of creating possibilities for experiences of attention and interest in something common.
Literature


Undervisningsministeriet (UVM) ”Inklusion”. Internet resource (accessed 02.02.2018): https://uvm.dk/folkeskolen/laering-og-laeringsmiljoe/inklusion/