Thinking and researching inclusive education without a banister – visiting, listening and tact as a foundation for collective research on inclusive education

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Thinking and researching inclusive education without a banister – visiting, listening and tact as a foundation for collective research on inclusive education

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ABSTRACT
This paper presents some initial findings of a double-sided study on collective research in inclusive education. The aim is to discuss how thinking on inclusive education can be produced and evolved in a community of inquiry consisting of practitioners and researchers. The paper presents both a research process and an explorative theoretical endeavour to rethink how we might conduct research in education and more specifically inclusive education. The theoretical point of departure is Hannah Arendt’s concept of ‘thinking without a banister’ which, succinctly put, means to be able to think without a fixed methodology. We connect Arendt’s idea of ‘thinking without a banister’ with Johann Friedrich Herbart’s concept of pedagogical tact, which deals with the strong connection between theory and practice in educational processes. The paper ends with a reflection on the possible influence on inclusive education of the framework presented, and how it might lead to a more inclusive starting point for thinking about and researching the field of inclusive education.

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Introduction
In an age of increased pressure on teachers and pedagogues to increase the level of output of educational processes in the form of higher achievement levels, better test scores, and increased inclusion of children with difficulties of various kinds, the political consensus seems to be that the way of achieving these objectives is through evidence based notions of best practice and statistically backed didactical and pedagogical methods. Meta-studies and literature reviews apparently pave the way for best practice, and the task of teachers and pedagogues becomes to follow the instructions handed to them by researchers and policymakers (Biesta 2009; Christensen and Krejsler 2015; Hammersley 2013; Vembye and Siggaard Jensen 2018). In this way, teachers and pedagogues are increasingly excluded from influencing and participating in researching and thinking about how educational work is conducted. In some cases, this leads to teachers not...
being able to follow their own educational judgment, by being forced to follow the guidelines imposed by politically backed methods. Masschelein and Simons have referred to this process as a form of ‘taming of teachers’ (2013, 103–104). If the judgment of the teacher or pedagogue is highly influenced by evidence-based methods it might turn into ‘conforming judgment’ (Wiberg 2014). Increasingly, teachers and pedagogues (at least in the Danish context, but we hazard to guess that this is not a local phenomenon) are becoming alienated from the methods they are asked to adopt and, subsequently, losing any sense of (didactical and pedagogical) autonomy.

This paper presents some initial findings of a double-sided study on collective research in inclusive education. It was a double-sided study in the sense that on the one hand we wanted to study teacher and pedagogue perspectives on inclusion, and on the other hand we wanted to experiment with a different way of doing research in inclusive education, where the practitioners were part of the process in a more profound way. The double-sided study thus consists of an investigation on two themes: inclusion of pedagogues and teachers in the research process, and inclusion in educational practice.

In the course of the resulting communities of inquiry involving researchers and practitioners in dialogue, we developed and discovered the relevance of working with thinking as a free and associative practice. In order to further intensify the discussion of the relationship between theoretical discourse on inclusion and inclusion in pedagogical practice, we began to focus on listening and visiting as foundational for pedagogical tact. The idea of this paper is thus to discuss how thinking on inclusive education can be produced and evolved in dialogue and cooperation with representatives from a field of practice. In this way, the paper presents a research process while simultaneously being an explorative theoretical endeavour to rethink how we might do research in education and more specifically inclusive education. The theoretical point of departure is Hannah Arendt’s concept of ‘thinking without a banister’, which, succinctly put, means to be able to think without a fixed methodology. During the course of the study, we began to connect Arendt’s idea of ‘thinking without a banister’ with J. F. Herbart’s concept of pedagogical tact, which deals with the strong connection between theory and practice in educational processes. This connection arose in the course of the communities of inquiry and helped both researchers and pedagogues to develop their thinking on how they work and speak about inclusive education as practice as well as research.

The first part of the paper presents Hannah Arendt’s concept of thinking without a banister as the starting point for the study, as well as the concept of pedagogical tact. The second part presents the research process and the communities of inquiry: how did they proceed and what became known during the meetings? The third part elaborates on the concepts of visiting and listening as foundational for pedagogical tact – as a foundation for research and practice in the field of (inclusive) education. The paper ends with a reflection on the possible influence on inclusive education of the framework presented, and how it might lead to a more inclusive starting point for thinking about and researching the field of inclusive education.

**Thinking without a banister**

Arendt’s ‘anti-methodology’ was developed in light of her idea of a break in tradition which saw the collapse of our moral and political standards, and even our historical chronology, and led her to develop her notion of thinking without a banister (De Valk 2010; Disch
In this section, we will elaborate on this notion building on existing interpretations of Arendt’s historical and theoretical (anti-)method, about which she herself did not write much. In *The Life of the Mind* Arendt hinted at her own methodological thinking by highlighting the ability to bring to light objects and events that have ‘suffered a sea-change’ (Arendt 1981, 212). The same metaphor appears in her essay on Walter Benjamin and hints at the inspiration she drew from her friend Benjamin (Arendt 1995; De Valk 2010; Honohan 1990). That the events and objects of the past suffer a sea-change refers to the idea that history cannot be ‘handed over’ or understood as if it were a singular, chronological and causal process. Instead, we must engage its events and objects as singular entities that in a way reveal something genuine and important to us, and have through the passing of time changed and cannot be grasped ‘as they were’ when they entered the world.

Thinking without a banister is thus connected to her notion that history is ruptured and the historian and political thinker functions as a form of pearl diver, who attempts to bring to light and to make speak the object under consideration (De Valk 2010, 40). According to Arendt, this way of thinking history and politics without a banister by making it speak by itself is our only recourse when history has been fragmented and ruptured. Further, it is connected to Arendt’s conception of human action as inherently unpredictable. Although human beings can initiate actions and new beginnings, ‘men never have been and never will be able to undo or even control reliably any of the processes they start through action’ (Arendt 1998, 233). This vulnerability of human (inter)action is accentuated by the break in tradition, and connects with the idea of thinking without a banister, as a way of living in and with the conditions of dark times and the unpredictability of human action.

When our traditional sources of certainty were displaced by theoretical, technological, and historical developments. Arendt’s conclusion was that we could no longer rely on the religious, ideological and theoretical tradition to bring meaning in the modern world (Arendt 1995, ix). For Arendt and many of her contemporaries, the break in tradition meant that the study of human affairs would have to abandon the idea that history could be understood in any final or linear way, or that any metaphysical or social theory could ever fully uncover the nature or causal structure of human existence and interaction (Arendt 2006, 59). Inspired in part by Walter Benjamin, Arendt instead proposed a way of working theoretically with the human condition where, instead of grounding one’s thinking in fixed methods and theories, one should attempt to make the theoretical work speak by itself by revealing something genuine about human existence and interaction (De Valk 2010, 40). The idea of making the work speak for itself is obvious in Arendt’s writing, where she – inspired by the phenomenological movement, and in particular the works of Heidegger – conducts arguments that convince the reader because she shows rather than deduces how elements of the human condition are connected (De Valk 2010, 40). However, Arendt’s ideas are not only connected to her understanding of historical and political/philosophical thinking but to her insistence on an anti-instrumental understanding of human existence and interaction. Arendt was deeply critical of utilitarian, economic and instrumental understanding of human existence. Speaking of the emerging social sciences of her time, Arendt bluntly stated:

> If their vocabulary is repulsive and their hope to close the alleged gap between our scientific mastery of nature and our deplored impotence to "manage" human affairs through an
engineering science of human relations sounds frightening, it is only because they have
decided to treat man as an entirely natural being whose life process can be handled the
same way as all other processes. (Arendt 2006, 59)

These approaches have a tendency to subsume human action under falsely causal and
instrumental categories, reducing the potential for change and renewal present in every
new generation. This tendency of ‘hanging on’ to the banisters of previous times was
according to Arendt, was also part of the reason why totalitarian rule could gain a foothold
in the twentieth century.

If you want to make a generalisation then you could say that those who were still firmly con-
vinced of the so-called old values were the first to be ready to change their old values for a
new set of values, provided they were given one. And I am afraid of this, because I think
that the moment you give anybody a new set of values – or this famous ‘bannister’ – you
can immediately exchange it. And the only thing the guy gets used to is having a ‘bannister’
and a set of values, no matter. (Arendt 1979, 314)

Our tendency to think in categorisations and handed over methodologies is thus not only a
scientific issue, but also concerns our everyday understanding of the world. Thinking
without a banister thus does not concern the application of categorisations and standards of
and on human (inter)action, but the continued attempt at understanding and coming to
terms with the human condition. Understanding, for Arendt, is not confined to theorising
and academia but is ‘an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we
come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the
world’ (Arendt 1994, 307–308). This perspective seems more relevant than ever in light
of the challenges of our time, and we are forced into new ways of trying to find and
give meaning to our (inclusive education) endeavours as researchers and practitioners.
This also means that what we can hope to achieve through the process of thinking is
not fixed and final conclusions, but understanding, and as we saw above, to the opportu-
nity to develop our pedagogical tact. We can reach limited and temporary understandings
of the events of the world – no small feat in the face of the modern world – and, more
significantly, it allows us to act upon that world in order to improve it. This, of course,
stands in stark contrast to certain influential discourses on education that highlight evi-
dence and standardisation as the way forward. With our framework, we do not aim for
best practices and evidence of what works, but subtle changes of the way we work with
and think about how to become more inclusive in education and in academia.

**Tact in research and practice**

The double sidedness of the study makes for a difficult framework for a paper such as this.
Usually, the empirical findings of a study are the central aspect of a paper; however, in this
case, it turned out that it was the process and the methodological approach that were most
interesting. During the course of the research process, which we structured around the
idea of thinking without a banister, it turned out that this way of working together – prac-
titioners and researchers in a community of inquiry (hereafter CI) (Kennedy and Kennedy
1990, 266) – opened up a space of reflection on a deeper level than we had experienced in
our previous projects. Thus, the paper will focus primarily on the methodological
approach developed through the process and only perfunctorily on the empirical findings.
An interesting and inspiring result of our investigation is the appearance of the ‘missing
link’ in the dialogue between researchers and practitioners. Inspired by Arendt, Herbart and English, we understand the ‘missing link’ as the lack of visiting, listening and tact in the dialogue. The present educational discourse of creating and distributing educational methods through statistical and meta-analysis based instruments has ceased listening to educational practice, ignoring (refusing to visit) the reality faced by teachers and educators and thus losing touch with the foremost educational ability/trait: namely, pedagogical tact. The concept of ‘pedagogical tact’ was first developed Herbart. In the short text ‘Die ersten Vorlesungen über Pädagogik’ (1802) (‘Introductory lecture to Students in Pedagogy’) (Herbart [1896] 2012), he describes educational tact as the mediator between theory and practice (Herbart [1896] 2012, 26). Pedagogical tact, according to Herbart, is the disposition of the educator to be guided by theory as well as practice and, on the background of this, be able to orchestrate a concrete pedagogical situation. Instead of preparing future actions in detail, the educator should, according to Herbart, prepare his tone and mind. In this sense, tact forms part of the educator’s professional character and is highly relevant for educational research and practice. Herbart describes execution of tact in the following way:

For the question on which depends a man’s being a good or bad educator is solely this – how tact forms itself in him, so as to be faithful or so as to be false to the laws enunciated by pedagogic science in its universality? [...] In other words, by reflection, reasoning, inquiry, in short, by science, the educator must prepare not his future action in individual cases so much as himself, his tone of mind, his head as well as his heart for correctly receiving, perceiving, feeling, and judging the phenomena awaiting him and the situation in which he may be placed. If he has anticipatingly indulged in extensive plans, the practical circumstances will mock him. But if he has equipped himself by fundamental theories, his experiences will be plain to him and teach him what is to be done in every case. (Herbart [1896] 2012, 20–21)

The important point we can learn from the quotation above is that science/research in the educational area cannot and should not take the role of directing and governing practice. However, the educator’s routine and experience are not enough. Therefore, the researcher and the practitioner must learn to listen to each other in order to develop concepts for thinking about education. CI with participation of practitioners and researchers is well suited for framing and developing educational work as an occupation based on tact. In striving to come to terms with the meaning and role of inclusion in practice, we realised how important it is to establish a dialogue between theoretical and practical approaches. Therefore, the paper deals with a reflection on the possible effects of the approach for inclusive education specifically and educational research and practice generally by connecting it to the concepts of educational tact and listening.

**Methodological approach: disclosure and collective reflection**

The idea of the two-sided study was to disclose and use collective thinking and inquiry to bring about a reflection on the subject ‘inclusion in Danish schools’. The framework for a collective thinking without a banister is, as mentioned, derived from the work of Hannah Arendt. The aim of the study was to bring the activity of thinking to a public (researchers and practitioners), and create a CI on the basis of this. Arendt used the example of Socrates to show how thinking can be brought into the public sphere and how through judging it is possible to bring the perspectives of others into the process as a form of enlarged thinking, which in essence is an inclusive endeavour
Four aspects thus characterise the developed framework: firstly, it is dialogical; secondly, it is collective; thirdly, it is anti-methodological; and, fourthly, it is intent upon mediation between conceptual and practical knowledge. That the framework is dialogical means that it is based on and strives for a continued and equal dialogue between researchers and practitioners in a collective striving for understanding – in the Arendtian sense described above. That it is collective means that no one individual – usually the researcher – is in charge of the process, but that it is a collective and shared undertaking; or, to put it in Arendtian terms, it is an activity in plurality, accepting the fact that human action and understanding is only possible in the knowledge of and interaction in a plurality of individual perspectives (Cavarero 2000, 89; Todd 2010, 7). That it is anti-methodological refers to the description above of thinking without a banister, and the central idea that we cannot simplify human interaction – and education – to fit a certain theoretical, philosophical or political understanding, but must instead work towards the development of pedagogical tact. Finally, the study is based on the notion that we cannot assume a straightforward distinction between practice and theory with regard to educational activities. This remnant of continental educational thinking, originally put forth by Herbart, refers to the idea that education is a discipline where theorising is intertwined with the practice of educating (Korsgaard and Mortensen 2017, 9–10). This rests on the idea that when thinking about education we must always connect our ideas to the context and presence of educating. In fact, as one out of four constitutive features of educational theory, Klafki writes that ‘in education, theory and practice are originally not separable in any meaningful way’ (Klafki 1971, 356). The idea for the CI thus rests on these four criteria, with the fourth one in particular pointing to an approach which has received too little attention in educational research (Korsgaard and Mortensen 2017). In our framework for the CI, we have drawn on the work by Nadia Kennedy and David Kennedy (Kennedy and Kennedy 2011) and tried to connect this with the notion of thinking without a banister and the concept of tact. In the CI, we (researchers, practitioners and students) began by identifying and engaging the central concepts with regard to inclusive education in Danish schools.

The communities of inquiry

The tentative framework for CI was explored through the course of a series of sessions with practitioners, researchers and students involved in inclusive education. The group consisted of: 2 school teachers (females), 2 student school teachers (male and female), 2 school pedagogues trained in inclusive education (females) and 3 researchers (1 male ad 2 females). The pedagogues were at the time ‘inclusion counsellors’ and, therefore, had a specific professional focus on inclusion. As it appears, we selected representatives among active school teachers and pedagogues with specific focus on inclusion. We chose to include student teachers because we wanted to learn how they deal with the concept in theory and practice during teacher training. The participants worked and studied at different schools and institutions. We had three meetings with a duration of 4–6 h over a period of one month in the Autumn 2014.

Aside from being an inspirational and thoroughly enjoyable process for all involved, it led to subsequent reflection on the relationship between researchers and practitioners.
However, there were difficulties in ‘extracting empirical data’ since the process was very much dialogical and unstructured in the sense that it followed the streams of thought that emerged during the process. Further, as the conversation throughout ebbed and flowed, sometimes with several people speaking at once, it was difficult to transcribe the recordings of the meetings. These difficulties point for us not to a flaw in the approach but rather to the excitement and the passion that the process brought about. In this way, it speaks to and underlines the idea of preferring subtle changes and understanding to universal ideas of best practice and what works, which seem only to bring more and more standardisation and exclusion to our schools. The aim of the paper is thus to open a perspective and a framework for continued development in collaboration with inclusive education researchers and practitioners with the aim of thinking anew – and without a banister – in order to meet the challenges of standardisation and alignment which are undermining the efforts of the inclusive education movement. The central idea of the three different sessions was thus to investigate together in a way that could challenge (or experiment with) both the researchers and the practitioner’s understandings and categorizations of inclusion. To do it without a fixed methodology and without the purpose of providing fixed methods or models to practice was the challenge for both the researchers and the practitioner.

It is important to note that the CIs were separate experiments and since it was a collective undertaking, we will refer collectively to the process rather than separating researchers and practitioners.

The first session: the concept of inclusion

The first experimental session with the CI concentrated on illuminating the concepts used when researchers, politicians and practitioners speak about inclusion. The form was dialogical and collective, and the idea was to identify concepts and prejudices that revolve around the idea of inclusion. We wanted to discuss whether the concept of inclusion could be justified in the context of the Danish school. Justification of educational concepts is, according to the educational philosopher R.S. Peters, a central task for philosophers of education (Peters 1972). The relevance and importance of an educational concept is investigated in order to elucidate and illustrate how the concept contributes to the development of the field of education. According to this approach, the concept of inclusion must be analysed in order to justify whether the idea of inclusion contributes to the development of educational research and practice. Does the concept of inclusion change practice and the theoretical understanding of education? Part of the analytical method is to identify concepts that are connected to the central concept under investigation. In this case, the central concept is ‘inclusion’. At this point in 2014, the Danish Ministry of Education defined inclusion in the following way:

Inclusion is about the experience of the child to be a valued participant in the social and disciplinary community. This is essential in order to learn and develop. All children and young persons need to be part of a community with pedagogues, teachers, other children and young people. (Danish Ministry of Education 2014. Webside is removed)

As it appears the meaning of ‘inclusion’ was to be part of a social and disciplinary community. In the dialogue the practitioners demonstrated that they were inspired
by the definition from the Danish Ministry while at the same time they were critical towards the idea of striving towards inclusion of almost all children in the mainstream school. Some of them mentioned that the idea of inclusion was driven by economy and neoliberal politics due to lack of money for special education. They knew that the Salamanca declaration was the starting point. However, in their daily job function, they focused on helping individual students to become members of the class community and in addition supporting and creating an inclusive classroom. In this sense, they followed in practice the definition from the Danish Ministry. The problems they pointed out was that some of the children who were supposed to be members of a mainstream class community did not fit into it. The pedagogues told us, that they did not have a clear job description because their function as inclusive counsellors was new. Therefore, ‘they built the ship while sailing’, as one of the pedagogues said. (Notes from the 1. th meeting)

We entered the dialogue by discussing how the Latin word ‘inclusio’ actually means ‘shutting up’ or ‘confinement’ (Perseus Digital Library ‘inclusio’). The idea was to present a meaning of the concept that we assumed would be contrary to our customary understanding of inclusion in terms of being part of a community. Since the etymological meaning of inclusion is ‘shutting up’, it creates an image of enforcement on children to take part in communities they have not chosen themselves. To reconstruct the concept in this negative way would be contrary to the political agenda; however, in our agenda, which was to establish a CI, it served as a critical intervention (Kennedy and Kennedy 2011, 266). The question to ask might be whether inclusion is always a worthwhile enterprise, and, in presenting this etymological meaning of the concept, we expected the dialogue to be saturated with reflection. Not surprisingly, most of us did not conceive the concept in this negative way, but the presentation of the etymological meaning of inclusion helped us to reflect on our prejudices concerning the concept. In the dialogue, we discussed how we use the concept and what other concepts are connected with inclusion. The way in which we used the concept of inclusion disclosed our assumptions and prejudices concerning the idea of inclusion, such as, for example, to be an active participant in a community. During the first meeting, we realised that we were entangled in webs of concepts revolving around a concept of inclusion, which was both idealistic and political. If we were to conduct an inquiry without a banister, all participants needed to come to some understanding of how we were caught in the web of understanding and practices. In this sense, inspired by Wittgenstein, we might say that the aim of the CI was therapeutic (Wittgenstein 1984, §133;255). The result of this first step into a dialogue was an understanding of how the concept of inclusion has an enormous impact on the daily life of teachers, researchers and social educators. Furthermore, we realised how the concept of inclusion seems to draw our attention in a direction that changes the way we look at the children’s patterns of participation in the school communities. Core concepts we identified to be closely connected with the positive meaning of inclusion include community, integration, care, well-being of the individual, and the group. According to one participant: ‘the work of inclusion is not only to help the children to become included but also to guide the educators to view the children in new ways and, in this sense, offer them another position in the community’ (Transcriptions 2014). The negative connotations of inclusion pointed at neoliberalism, economy and political agendas.
The second session: inclusion as events in practice

The next step was to get closer to how inclusion is experienced in practice. The purpose was to promote discussions and dialogues on experiences of inclusion and to try to transcend common sense ways of talking about inclusion. We encouraged ourselves to give examples from situations in practice in order to get beyond common sense definitions, dominant political and economic discourses, and dominant theoretical pedagogical understandings of inclusion.

The second session thus focused on practice and events of inclusion. While the first session could be characterised as analytical, the second one was characterised by descriptions of practice, which quickly turned out to be drawing at least partly on an ethnographic approach similar to narratives of practice (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Hastrup 2003; Spradley 1980). Therefore, examples of events in practice formed the focus of the meeting. Storytelling of events from daily practice was a central way of demonstrating a picture of inclusion as a practice with many different work tasks throughout the day and where many kinds of problems occur. We began by asking ourselves for examples of how a day at our schools, colleges or universities might look. It seems to be possible to go beyond an understanding of inclusion as a normative practice by asking about everyday practice. We tried to remember step-by-step how a particular day began and what we were doing during the day. In order to be very concrete, we tried to imagine our daily ‘walking route’ through the geographical landscape of our work. During this imaginative stroll through space and time, we hoped to be able to identify examples of practices of inclusion.

One participant explained it in this way:

Should I start? Yes. Well, I’ve been trying to write down and just remember a particular day. I usually arrive at 7.30 in the morning and just start out by planning my day. In principle, I have a schedule of the classes that I am working in, but because there are so many changes due to meetings or sudden occurrences, I have to change the schedule. I then make sure I have notified the teachers of whether I’ll be joining their classes that day. This is what I start out doing in the morning. Then I’m in class 0x where the pupils go for a run every morning and I’m there to support a boy whom I spend a lot of time with. I support him in the morning when he’s out running; that is why I’m there. Afterwards, I turn up at my head master’s office for a short meeting. I function as a mentor in relation to the new social educators [pedagogues], so on this particular day I had a half-hour meeting with her about the coordination of the supervision – who does what and how? Then I spent the next lesson preparing for a conversation with a pupil, a girl in second grade who is not getting on so well at the moment, socially. (Transcriptions 2014)

Many of our stories were similar to the example given above. Inclusion was, therefore, discussed in the CI as a matter of taking care of different pupils/students of different ages and with different support needs, and as a practice where an important part of the task is to support the teachers (our colleagues) and cooperate with the parents. Apparently, inclusion was not about working with the same pupil or the same group but to solve lots of actual problems which show up on a specific day and because of that to have an overview of the different needs of different children/students and colleagues. The examples from practice gave rise to a discussion of the inclusive teacher through the metaphor of ‘a squid or cuttlefish’.

This teacher is conscious of the many aspects of inclusion in the daily routines and practices and has many tentacles that are sensitive to shifts and movements around
them. The inclusive pedagogue is thus one who can handle different and at times conflicting demands, and one who is able to be attentive in more than one direction. She has her tentacles out and is attuned to and sensitive to her surroundings. As we shall see this metaphor links well with the notions of listening and pedagogical tact. It is the teacher who listens to her surroundings and ‘attunes’ to them, rejecting the passive and observing posture, as emphasised by one participant:

> It would actually be interesting to look at how the teachers, the adults, are inclusive. Because this colleague is just sitting on his ‘flat ass’ doing nothing, he is not very inclusive. When you are working with the team, it is the teachers that you talk to it is the teachers’ tone, language, behaviour and all those kinds of things that need to be changed. So those little events really happen, as I understand it right now, because you have some teachers that are inclusive and who know that when they put a hand on that pupil’s shoulder or just make eye contact or … .

(Transcriptions 2014)

This highlights how teachers might be inclusive in very concrete and everyday ways in their method of talking, moving, touching etc. The example demonstrates how the practitioner listens to the children and how she is tactful. The remark started a dialogue about inclusion as a matter of relations between teachers rather than only relations between the pupils or teachers with special work tasks of inclusion, and which continued after the meeting was supposed to have ended. The second CI helped us to discuss inclusion at a micro level as events of pedagogical practice. It gave rise to new thoughts and ideas for both the researchers and the practitioners. In this sense, we succeeded in visiting and listening to each other. Furthermore, the events illuminate our assumption that ‘tact’ is a very important disposition due to the unpredictable daily practices of teachers and social educators.

**The third session: utopian perspectives**

In the third session, we worked with a utopian perspective in order to work through some of the narratives from the first and second sessions. This way of working with narratives and practice stories opens up a space of reflection on how the world could look if we abandon the mundane political and structural entanglements of educational work. It opens a particular space that we are not accustomed to inhabiting, caught up as we usually are in the routines and practices of our occupation as researchers, teachers and pedagogues.

In their seminal work *Future workshops: How to Create Desirable Futures* (1987), Robert Jungk and Norbert Müllert set out a way of working towards political and institutional change from the bottom up. Inspired by their approach, the third meeting took the form of an abridged futures workshop where we engaged with the findings of the second meeting from a utopian perspective. How could we in the future and with the means needed work towards changing and overcoming the obstacles to inclusion in schools based on the practical experiences of the teachers.

By creating maps of the trains of thought that unfolded during the meeting and by centring on central statements and concepts, the future workshop helped us to reach a point where both utopian and achievable (in the present) objectives and changes to practice could be identified. Most important here was the experience that the teachers and pedagogues were able to claim ownership of the ideas that were developed during the meetings. This
allowed us to listen not only to the other participants but also to our own practice in a new way and gain new insights into our ways of working: our own pedagogical and scientific tact.

One of the things that emerged was a discussion of who should determine how to perform educational work. Is it the practitioners themselves or is it politicians or researchers who should determine how to act in educational practices. As one participant phrased it:

What really are our tasks, our self-understanding of our job? This is constantly challenged and questioned by politicians and societal perspectives. [There is a] paradox between defending our professionality but at the same time demanding and expecting education (training) and answers from politics … seeking answers from others on the outside, what are we to be ‘dressed for’ and who should give that answer. (Transcriptions 2014)

Here, the participant pinpoints the intricate relation between theory and practice in education: or, more precisely, the question of what to found educational action upon. Is it something that unfolds in practice or can we expect theory and research to provide answers to how we act in educational situations. What the three meetings showed us was that bringing practitioners into the actual conceptual and theoretical work is one way of trying to overcome the alienation that teachers and pedagogues feel with regards to what governs their work; further, it can be one way of trying to overcome the practice-theory divide that the evidence agenda is widening in the present educational environment.

Another theme that emerged (again) in the third CI was the increasing need to focus on listening and dialogue in education and educational research. Not just in the sense of listening to what teachers and pedagogues are actually saying when we theorise but that we actually try to go visiting the mind-sets and experiences of pedagogues. This could be reduced to observing their work and interviewing and surveying their attitudes and opinions, but the teachers and pedagogues involved in these CI all agreed that actually being a part of the process greatly increased their sense of having been listened to – much more so than being the subject of a research project as an informant. In fact, what emerged was a heightened understanding of the need to ‘stay’ in the process of dialogue and of listening rather than focusing on what could be extracted from the process in the form of data, evidence or method. Researchers might restrict the dialogue they have with practitioners in order not to ‘infect’ the data that can be extracted from the research (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). While there is good reason to be restrictive when concerned with traditional quantitative and qualitative research, perhaps sometimes we must abandon these reservations and the desire for something to extract from the process in order to stay in the dialogue and to keep listening to practice. At least we propose with this tentative framework that we try to stay in dialogue and try to include practitioners much more in the process of developing research, method and theory. In the following section, we further explore the concepts of listening and visiting and how they are connected to the idea of pedagogical tact in order to unfold how we believe the proposed way of working is more adequately connected to educational practice than the somewhat abstracted metadata collection and evidence-based notions that presently abound.

**Listening and visiting**

Issues of inclusion always entail ethical issues attached to practices of (and research into) inclusion, such as integrity, respect and interest in the perspective of others. Through
analytical and philosophical engagement with the concepts attached to inclusion in the course of the CI we were able to examine how inclusion is translated from theory to policy and in turn into pedagogical and didactical practices. This enabled a narrative of how these concepts reveal themselves to and influence practice, in turn allowing for a collective exploration of how to change practice, which is highly sensitive to the specific context of the practitioners and the subtlety of how political, ideological, marketised and reproductive forces influence (inclusive) educational practices.

If practitioners and researchers are to explore issues of inclusion collectively, it requires that they listen to each other. Inspired by the work of English ([2013] 2014), we will discuss how listening is essential for bridging the gap between theoretical and practical approaches to inclusion. According to English, listening is an inherently educational concept. Teachers have to listen to the students and the students have to listen to the teachers in order to understand the perspectives of each other. Listening is not only essential with regard to understanding other perspectives but also qualifies thinking and judgment because it creates a channel that transports sources of knowledge and experience from one part to the other. If we move the idea of listening into the context of collaboration between practitioners and researchers, listening might be seen as a means to mediate between the knowledge and experience offered by both perspectives. In this sense, listening and visiting are important aspects of tact in educational research. We will elaborate on this in the next session.

In her Kant lectures, Arendt presents the idea of ‘going visiting’ in relation to the Kantian idea that imagination is essential for thinking (Arendt 1992, 43). Arendt emphasises this by using the metaphor of visiting. In order to understand, compare and put oneself in the place of others, imagination is a necessary faculty. This is not the same as empathy or accepting the standpoint of someone else. Rather, it refers to the ability of seeing from the viewpoint of someone else, but with one’s own eyes. To go visiting is not to become someone else momentarily but precisely to visit the standpoint of someone else. Arendt explained this in her reply to critics in the wake of the heated debate around her essay ‘Reflections on Little Rock’ (1959). Here, she explained how she had attempted to visit the standpoint of the mothers of the young African American children who were sent to segregated schools in order to enforce integration.6 The images of ‘going visiting’ and ‘listening’ both point to human activities that physically and spiritually move perspectives closer to each other. From the vantage point of the researcher, it is valuable to visit and listen to the experience and knowledge of the practitioner, and, from the viewpoint of the practitioner, visiting and listening to the researcher is helpful as well. One might well ask why the practitioner should listen to the researcher. To answer this we might visit and listen to the thoughts of Herbart concerning his concept of ‘tact’.

**Pedagogical tact in practice and research**

As mentioned previously, tact in the philosophy of Herbart has the function of mediating between theory and practice. ‘[T]act occupies the place that theory leaves vacant, and so becomes the immediate director of practice’ (Herbart [1896] 2012, 20). Tact thus mediates between theory and practice in a very subtle way. English describes Herbart’s concept of tact as the link between educational theory and educational practice (English [2013] 2014, 50). If teachers only learned from their experience, they would just imitate past practices (English [2013] 2014, 50). Theory helps teachers to move on and develop their way of
teaching: ‘But a teacher’s tact, her wise decisions in the moment, are wise because they are attuned to theory in a way that prevents educational practice from becoming merely an imitation of past practices’ (English [2013] 2014, 50). The concept of tact integrates ethical issues such as respect for each other’s perspective with learning about the world. The teacher demonstrates tact when she act adequately and knowingly in the situation such as described in an earlier quotation: ‘... because you have some teachers that are inclusive and who know that when they put a hand on that pupil’s shoulder or just make eye contact or …’ (Transcriptions 2014, second meeting). Another example of tact and listening is the teacher who everyday invents a new technical problem in order to give an autistic boy the opportunity to solve the problem. She tells: ‘He functions best if he everyday solves a problem for me, preferably a technical problem. Therefore every morning I must invent a new problem with my iPad.’ (Transcriptions 2014, second meeting)

During the CI, we learned from each other, and the concept of inclusion was enlightened from a practitioner as well as a researcher perspective. This is something entirely different to simply implementing the myriad of inclusion methods that are offered in the literature (See for example, Alenkær 2008; Baltzer, Højholdt, and Hansen 2016; Clasen, Jørgensen, and Boel 2013; Mitchell 2014; Ritchie 2014). From the perspective of the researcher, tact is an important disposition for conducting research in practice.

Interesting examples of tact in the research process are demonstrated especially during the second meeting. In this meeting, the practitioners were encouraged to find examples of events where inclusive practices appear. This gave the opportunity to discuss what an ‘event’ is and how the telling of an event serves as a stepping-stone for theorising practice. The telling of the event in this case works as a mediator between theory and practice because it (afterwards) points at the concept of tact. The following dialogue concerns an event where a boy repeatedly is rejected by other boys. The dialogues demonstrates how the idea of ‘event’ facilitates a discussion of an important aspect, namely for whom something is an event?:

Teacher: I think. If we take the boy’s perspective, then we might have discovered this before [the rejection of the boy by the other boys]. For him it is a new event that he is rejected once more. Maybe he thought something else would happen.

Researcher: Yes, I think you are right.

Another practitioner: Yes, I noticed that now it turns the other way around.

Teacher: Yes, professionally. It depends on how it is turned around – how we think ‘event’ (Transcription 2014, second meeting)

The researcher (as well as the educator) must find her way between practice and theoretical approaches. This is due to the fact that if the researcher wants to know something about what is going on in practice, he/she must visit and listen to practice; otherwise, the researcher runs the risk of developing knowledge that has nothing to do with what is actually going on in practice. As Biesta reminds us:

More than just the question of the technical validity of our measurements – i.e. whether we are measuring what we intend to measure – the problem here lies with what I suggest to call the normative validity of our measurements. This is the question whether we are indeed measuring what we value, or whether we are just measuring what we can easily measure and thus end up valuing what we (can) measure. (Biesta 2009, 33)
If the researcher has the aim of expanding on and developing new nuances and pictures of practice, he/she must learn the art of scientific tact. It means that the researcher must have the ambition of understanding practice both from within and with a theoretical distance.

**Concluding remarks**

Inclusion is in this paper understood on two levels: first, as something that is going on in educational practice and, second, as inclusion of practitioners in CI. We have thus focused on how we as educational researchers can develop meaningful CI in collaboration with practitioners. We argue that three important practices or dispositions are essential for educational research as well as educational practice: namely, visiting, listening and tact. These concepts unfolded and revealed themselves to us during the course of the workshop and where then connected to their conceptual and theoretical origins. They functioned as different focal points for our discussions and helped to guide into theorising on the basis of what was in fact nothing more than a conversation between pedagogues working with inclusion in various ways in schools, universities and colleges. During the course of three CIs on inclusion, we found what we coin the *missing link* between educational theory and educational practice: namely pedagogical tact. Inspired by Arendt’s concept of visiting and listening and Herbart’s concept of tact, we suggest that educational practitioners and researchers by means of visiting and listening can and should develop their tact as teachers and researchers. This means to train their bodies and their mind so as to be able to attune themselves to the practices they encounter and develop on the basis of a constant swerve between theory and practice; a tact that forms itself in them and through them so as to reveal to them in every instance how they should act. Not based upon a fixed and finished method or model of ‘what works’ or best practice but because a tact and an attunement has developed in them, enabling them to better understand and act as pedagogues, teachers and researchers. As we saw in the earlier quote from Herbart for the pedagogue concerns an attunement and preparation of ‘his tone of mind, his head as well as his heart’ in order to be present in the context of education in a proper and tactful way. Another metaphor we encountered was the pedagogue as an octopus that has its tentacles out in order to scope the surroundings and attune its body and posture to them. There have been many a metaphor for the work of teachers and pedagogues, such as gardener, guide, therapist and so on (Maxwell 2015, 87). Perhaps the metaphor of the octopus is a strange one, but it links well with the imagery of the tactful pedagogue who is attuned and attentive to her surroundings and listens to and allows herself to go visiting the perspectives of children, students and colleagues. Pedagogical tact of this kind can only be developed collectively – if we listen to and visit each other – and if we engage in earnest with the theories, policies and concepts that influence our work as pedagogues and educators. Pedagogical tact does not promise to fix the school or improve achievement (that of students and teachers), but it holds a promise of providing a better vocabulary for reclaiming a pedagogical language about inclusion and education. One where teachers and researchers (both of them educators) become attuned to the practices of each other and resist the urge to extract fixed and easy methods and answers from the other. In this way, a collective and inclusive way of speaking about inclusion and education can emerge where both the research and practice develops tactfully in respect to the other.
Notes

1. This is evident in the increasing influence of evidence-based thinking on teacher and social educator education in Denmark and in the influence of evidence-based researchers such as David Mitchell, John Hattie and Robert Slavin on policy making (Bjerre and Reimer 2014; Vembye and Siggaard Jensen 2018; Hattie 2009; Slavin 2002; Mitchell 2014).

2. This is apparent in the influence of the Danish Clearinghouse for Educational Research on educational policy making in Denmark, along with the abovementioned evidence researchers.

3. There has been some work done in the field of inclusive education based on Arendt’s work. Most of these build on her political theory and her concepts of plurality and natality (Giaever and Jones 2017; Veck 2014; White 2017). Exceptions to this is Harwood (2010a, 2010b, and Korsgaard (2016) who work from a similar vein of Arendtian thinking as this article.

4. This connects to Arendt’s critique of historians in the school of Ranke, who proclaimed that the aim of historiography is to portray history as it happened [wie es eigentlich gewesen] (Ranke 1885, vi).

5. Our translation of ‘theorie und Praxis sind in der Erziehung ursprünglich nicht zwei klar voneinander geschiedene Bestätigungen’.

6. One might of course argue that this was an instant where Arendt was not very successful in her attempt to go visiting, and she later admitted that she had not fully understood the situation (Bernasconi 1996, 15).

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Danish Ministry of Education. 2014. Website is removed.


Transcriptions from the three meetings. 2014. (Translated from Danish by the authors).


