Comparative Education Term Paper

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“Inclusive Education stems from the belief that education is a basic human right and the foundation of a just society and no one should be denied of it” (“Inclusion Quotes”). These words, spoken by Amoah Teteh, the Deputy Minister of Education in Ghana, support a global trend toward and belief in inclusive education. This trend was reinforced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006. The purpose of this convention was to move towards a new perspective of disabilities as a human rights issue and to focus on promoting, protecting, and ensuring these rights to persons with disabilities in all areas of life, including education (“Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities”). Despite such efforts to make education more inclusive and equal, individuals with disabilities still face many obstacles within classrooms around the world, as tremendous inconsistencies exist in terms of special education and inclusive practices from country to country.

At the middle school level, students begin to discover passions, develop and maintain relationships, and form habits that will shape who they are and the person they become. As a result, inclusive education is crucial to helping students with disabilities receive a quality education that will begin to prepare them for the future, as well as meeting their deep desire to fit in socially and find their place in the classroom environment. By comparing inclusive practices in the United States and European countries, knowledge can be gained and progress made toward an equal and quality education for all students and therefore a more secure future for societies around the world.

As attention to inclusion, which includes students with learning disabilities, intellectual and emotional disabilities, and any student with special educational needs, has increased in recent decades, changes can be observed in both the United States and Europe. Progress is evident in the United States according to the Annual Report to Congress, as the national average of students ages 6-21 with learning disabilities who spend at least 80% of their time in regular classroom increased from 31.6% in 1989 to 51.9% in 2004 (Ferguson, 2008, p. 111). The progress toward the inclusion of students with intellectual and emotional disabilities, however, is much lower. Improvements can also be observed in Europe, where countries such as Luxembourg have made strides toward creating more inclusive environments for students with special needs. In fact, in some countries, as many as 80-90% of students with special needs are benefiting from inclusion (Ferguson, 2008, p. 111). Despite these gains, what occurs within these general education classrooms in terms of quality instruction and the social dynamic for students with special needs is less clear across different states and countries.

Differences between the United States and Europe, however, may stem beyond classroom practices to wider cultural differences. Varying goals and perspectives on the role and purpose of individuals in society can impact many aspects of society including education and inclusion. The “American Dream,” for example, stresses the ability of the individual to succeed through hard work and determination, and is less concerned with human togetherness and interdependence. The “European Dream,” however, places a heavier emphasis on community and the importance of togetherness in an interconnected world. According to Rifkin (2004), “The European Dream emphasizes community relationships over individual autonomy, cultural diversity over assimilation, quality of life over the accumulation of wealth, sustainable development over unlimited material growth, deep play over unrelenting toil, universal human rights and the rights of nature over property rights, and global cooperation over unilateral exercise of power” (p.3). These descriptions suggest an individualistic and perhaps self-centered view of society in the United States, and a community-based, selfless emphasis in Europe. Such values may result in different views of the roles of institutions such as the education system and its function in society.

According to the United Nations, it is necessary “to build public awareness of the positive short- and long-term results, societally and individually, of education for individuals with disabilities (Befring, 1997, p. 184). This view of inclusion is consistent with European values, as it is dependent on many members of a community—the public—not simply the individual. This perspective stresses the benefits of inclusions for all people, moving away from a focus on the individual and contradicting some of the principles present in the American Dream. Despite these cultural differences, actual practices related to inclusion in Europe and the United States do not necessarily align with these cultural values. Furthermore, the lack of consistency related to inclusive practices in both the United States and Europe may suggest that minimal progress related to inclusion has been made on a wide-scale level.

When observing schools in the United States, for example, some classroom environments appeared very equal and those with disabilities were integrated into the normal activities and made a normal part of the community. At National Trail Middle School in New Paris, Ohio, for example, students with special needs worked with typical peers, participated in the discussions, and completed many of the same assignments. According to the teacher, Sharon Cobb, this contributes positively to the classroom community (personal communication, November 2011). Such an environment does not align with the American dream in which individual growth is valued over the community. It also shows that true inclusion is more than simply being in the same classroom.

Contradictions were also evident in European classrooms. In some classes students with special needs sat in another area or room and were not included in the regular routine or classroom assignments. In an Austrian school, the students with special needs were somewhat isolated from their peers. For example, one student with a learning disability sat in the back of the room and seemed disengaged from the class. The teacher also seemed less concerned with monitoring this student’s progress. In a similar situation, a student with special needs was doodling while the rest of the class was focusing intently on the assignment, and the teacher explained that it was, “nothing to worry about.” In these examples, although the students were included in the general education classroom, they were not engaged in the activities as an active part of the class. Failing to include students with special needs in the classroom community does not fit the European values of togetherness and community.

Differences in language used to refer to students with special needs were also evident. In the United States, the use of appropriate or “correct” language was frequently observed. The teachers did not openly refer to them as different and only discussed the students and their needs privately. In Austria, a teacher pointed to students and described them as “weak” or “not good enough” for the regular assignments during the class. Although such a willingness to talk about these students within earshot of the class does create an open environment and has the potential to generate conversation, it may have negative effects on the self-esteem of students and create a separation between those students and the rest of the class, therefore negatively impacting the classroom community. Similarly, when describing policies related to inclusion, an Austrian teacher identified the issue as the “special needs problem.”

The language used in legislation in the United States shows a strong value in using language that is very sensitive and respectful towards people with special needs. For example, the title Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) replaced the Education of All Handicapped Children Act. Although the mission of both acts is similar, to ensure a “free and appropriate public education” to all children with disabilities, the difference is that the latter uses “person first” language that emphasizes the person rather than his or her disability (Protigal, 1999). Students in the United States, however, are often labeled according to their specific disability. Differences and sensitivity towards language in classrooms in Austria and the United States suggest that students may be more included in classrooms in the United States because isolating labels are less common.

Research shows that using labels can have a positive or negative impact on students with special needs depending on their usage. What is important is that the label helps the student, teachers, parents, and administrators improve the quality of instruction. According to Lauchlan and Boyle (2007), a label is beneficial if it allows teachers and others involved to tailor instruction to better meet the needs of a student (p. 36). For example, if a student has Asperger Syndrome, an educator can use research-based practices and identify effective strategies to meet the needs of the student more effectively. In this way, labels can be used to help them receive proper resources and necessary instruction (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007, p. 37). Using person-first language in addition to the specific disability, a practice often used classrooms across the United States, can be effective in that it respects the individual and may also improve the effectiveness of instruction. The problem, however, occurs when students are identified incorrectly or an unrelated characteristic is incorrectly used to guide instruction, or when labels are ambiguous (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007, p. 39).

Using less specific labels, such as those observed in the Austrian classrooms, may prove harmful for students with disabilities. General terms such as “weak” or “problem” when identifying and discussing students with special needs does not provide insight into educational practices that will improve learning. In addition, labeling can have negative effects on self-esteem and social relationships. According to Lauchlan and Boyle (2007), the use of labels can lead to teasing, bullying, increased exclusion, and lower expectations (p. 41). In addition, using information provided by such labels may be harmful because it is too general and fails to provide students with specific instruction that meets their individual needs. Based on such research, it is clear that labels can negatively influence a classroom’s dynamic and sabotage efforts toward the inclusion of students with special needs in the process.

Although there are observable differences in some instances, a classroom in Luxembourg was setup very similarly to those observed in the United States, showing that parts of Europe are quickly advancing inclusive practices. A student with special needs sat in the middle of the classroom and had an adult aid working with him. Throughout the class, the student raised his hand and participated in the discussion along with his peers. He used a computer to help him with writing and note-taking, and frequently received guidance and support from the adult. There were also times when the adult and student would quietly discuss what the teacher or another student said, presumably to improve understanding. Having additional assistance available for a student with special needs and truly including him in the classroom by encouraging participation and ensuring understanding is very similar to the inclusion methods observed in the United States, although different than the classrooms observed in Austria. It is clear that progress has been made related to creating inclusive classrooms and improving the learning of all students in both Europe and the United States, but these three examples show that tremendous variety still exists. In addition, even though legislation may encourage and require inclusive classrooms and uniformity, what occurs in practice may differ greatly from classroom to classroom.

Despite these differences, organizations such as United Nations and UNESCO continue to address issues of inclusion in both the United States and Europe. According to Donnelly and Watkins (2011), there is a growing understanding that more collaboration and systematic reform is necessary to create education that is inclusive and quality for all learners (p. 343). The Commission of the European Communities believes that inclusion is placing new demands on teachers and stresses qualities such as being well-qualified, possessing skills to support learners, understanding the social needs of students, and being innovative while using evidence-based practices (Donnelly & Watkins, 2011, p. 343). By making the profession more attractive, it is believed that the quality of teachers and therefore student performance will improve.

The Council of the European Union continues to research and outline ways to make quality inclusive education more common and consistent. Using more personal approaches such as individual learning plans, reworking assessment to better support students, providing teachers with skills to teach cooperatively, and increasing participation in the classroom will help meet the needs of all learners (Donnelly & Watkins, 2011, p. 344). A strong focus on the education of the teacher in order to improve inclusive education persists in Europe. One example is a school reform model that includes initial training to develop skills and coaches that are placed in school to support teachers (Donnelly & Watkins, 2011, 344). Research in Europe emphasizes the need for teachers to have “Dispositions such as resilience, positive attitudes towards disability, and the belief that learners with diverse needs have potential, and other researchers point to the need to remove the ‘experience based barriers’ which arise because the teachers themselves are not educated in inclusive settings” (Donnelly & Watkins, 2011, 345). This research suggests an emphasis on teacher training and systematic reform to improve inclusive education.

There is similar research related to the need for teacher training in the United States. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 requires highly qualified special education teachers. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2011), requirements such as content knowledge, using individualized education plans (IEP), and teacher support align closely with European goals related to inclusion. In addition, there has been a transition away from the idea of special education in the United States, as pull-out classes and separate areas for instruction have been replaced by individualized instruction within the general education classroom and with typical peers (Baker and Zigmond, 1995, 163). The challenge, however, is to ensure that the education taking place in a classroom in which all students are together is in fact specialized to meet the needs of all students, where typically developing students as well as those with special needs are benefiting. Results of the National Longitudinal Transition Study show that students that spend more time in general education classrooms were likely to score higher on reading and math tests, have fewer absences and less disruptive behavior, develop stronger social skills, and have a brighter future after completing their school. At the same time, it has been shown that inclusion improves achievement for all students (Cheryl, 2011). The challenge, however, is to determine how to ensure all students are receiving a quality education within the same classroom and based on individual needs.

According to a study of five schools in the United States, inclusive classrooms included special education teachers that taught students with disabilities as well as the rest of the students, and worked closely with general education teachers as well as teaching teams (Baker & Zigmond, 1995, 170). In this way, the special education teacher became an integral part of the classroom community, helping to put inclusion into practice. In one example, co-teaching was used to benefit all students in the classroom, where the teachers participated equally during instruction. According to the study, one of the problems special education teachers faced was feeling like outsiders in the general education teacher’s classroom, creating division rather than uniting the class (Janice Baker & Zaomi Zigmond, 1995, 172).

Another important factor to creating a truly inclusive environment according to recent research in the United States is planning time and collaboration. During this time, the teachers discussed instruction and the special educator had the opportunity to suggest ways to differentiate the activity, use alternative handouts, and brainstorm alternate assignments if necessary (Baker & Zigmond, 1995, 172). This aspect of inclusion is clearly important, as it ensures that all teachers are working together and that the needs of all students in the class are being met. An important distinction, however, was that “planning occurred at the ‘activity’ level (what reading assignment or worksheet would the group be given to do,) not at the individual student level (what unique assignment will be developed for a particular child)” (Baker & Zigmond, 1995, 172). Such a focus helps all students remain a part of the classroom by avoiding isolating specific students. In fact, when accommodations were made for the entire class the goal was to provide all students with a quality education and an equal opportunity to succeed. The results of the study were positive, as students were taught enthusiastically by both general and special education teachers simultaneously, creating a comfortable learning environment for all.

Teaching enthusiastically and developing an attitude that supports inclusion is also a key aspect of the push for inclusion in Europe. According Donnelly and Watkins (2011), quality inclusive teaching requires less prejudice, hands-on experience, a desire for equality, and sensitivity to diversity in the classroom (p. 345). Similar to the United States, there is a belief in the importance of collaboration with others and a positive attitude toward disabilities to meet diverse learning needs in Europe. Although both systems are moving toward the same goals, progress varies from state to state and country to country, as educators experiment with how to successfully create an inclusive classroom.

The way in which individuals with special needs are educated and included within middle school and beyond could potentially have large implications for their treatment after formal school ends and the transition to adulthood begins. If these students are better included in the classroom community during school, perhaps they will be more prepared to interact with and navigate society once schooling has concluded. During this time, the amount and type of services provided is important to consider, and European countries can provide a framework for the United States to consider when planning. In the Netherlands, for example, disabilities are addressed in school but not into adulthood (Gerber, 2001, p.2). The belief is generally that services into adulthood are counterproductive and may result in labeling as well as other negative consequences, and this system is supported by most people in the society.

In Denmark, there are few legislative acts that require services to adults with disabilities, but they participate in education and training experiences even after formal schooling ends, creating opportunities for lifelong learning and inclusion into society (Gerber, 2001, p. 3). One piece of legislation describing “Evening Schools” provides extremely individualized instruction and works with communication, social skills, and job skills (p.3). Such a setup has attributes that mirror the goals of inclusion within schools such as providing individualized educations and helping the student become a part of society through the development of skills and the ability to interact with others effectively.

Using these successful European systems for adults with disabilities, the United States can create a system that meets the needs of the American educational system (Gerber, 2001, p.4). Regardless of the policies chosen, what occurs at the middle and high school levels will certainly impact the lives of students with disabilities into adulthood. Inclusion, however, supports both of these European models as it works towards the highest quality education for all students, individualizes the education of those with disabilities, and helps adopt them into the classroom community by treating them equally and giving them the chance to interact with all peers in a regular classroom setting.

Another example of a strong European system of inclusion is found in Italy under Law 517 passed in 1977, which decreased the use of separate schools for students with disabilities in favor of inclusion classrooms. Since then, inclusive practices have been strengthened, as most students with disabilities are taught in a general education class, teachers have only one student with disabilities per class and class size is limited, and the teacher has support from another trained teacher (Cornoldi, Terreni, Scruggs, and Mastropieri, 1999, p. 350). As a result of this law, 98.5% of students with disabilities attend regular education classes in Italy (Cornoldi et al., 1999, p. 351). In addition, the policies mandated by the law as well as familiarity due to such long use have led to positive attitudes toward inclusion by teachers in Italian schools. According to Cornoldi et al. (1999), “Teachers generally agreed that inclusion enhances social skills, learning skills, and autonomy of students with disabilities, and tolerance and understanding of diversity in other children” (p. 351). Specifically, 74.3% of teachers were willing to teach students with special needs in their classroom, 75.8% believe students with disabilities benefit from inclusion, and 53.6% believe that other students benefit (p. 352). These statistics show the positive support of inclusion by teachers after implementing inclusive practices in their classrooms.

When comparing these findings to similar research in United States, Cornoldi et al. (1999) suggests that the results related to teacher support of inclusion are similar, although the attitudes are more positive in Italy (p. 353). One key difference is that while 27.7% of teachers in the United States felt they had adequate time to teach students with disabilities, only 18.6% of teachers in Italy felt the same. Similarly, only 22.3% of teachers in Italy believed they had sufficient skills or training to these students effectively, and 29.2% in the United States. Finally, 8.1% of teachers in Italy and 37.6% in the United States believed they had enough resources to teach effectively in the classroom (p. 354). These findings show that even though teachers, particularly in Italy, may have positive attitudes toward inclusion and its benefits for the classroom environment as well as all students, they do not feel as positively about their training, the time they have to teach, or the resources that are available to them. Such findings certainly show the importance of teacher training in order to implement inclusion successfully, which supports the goals of current legislation in both the United States and Europe. In addition, this study suggests that although attitudes related to inclusion may be improving, actual classroom practices may still be lacking. This is because teachers still feel they lack the time, training, and resources to teach students with special needs along with other students effectively. The observations of Austrian schools in which what actual occurs in the classroom contrasts overarching attitudes towards inclusions also support this research.

Italy, however, is not the only country working to make classrooms more inclusive in Europe. In Austria, there are three types of inclusion models used in classrooms. According to the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2010), the first is inclusive classes, where all students are instructed together and participate in the same activities. There are also classes with support teachers, where students with special needs receive additional support each week. Finally, there are co-operation classes, where students are separated some of the time or all of the time depending on what the teachers deem appropriate (“European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education”). In order to help in this process, Austria has Special Education Centers that provide expert opinions to help identify students with special needs, counseling, training, communication with parents and others in order to provide as much support as possible (“European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education”).

In Luxembourg, the law of June 28, 1994 enables children with special needs to participate in schools under total inclusion or partial inclusion and can benefit from support services while in regular classrooms. By the time a student in Luxembourg reaches the middle school age, they often enroll in technical secondary education, which prepares them for working life (“European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education”). The student observed working with an aid and participating in the class at the technical school in Luxembourg supports this system in that he was actively involved in an educational setting that would prepare him to function as a member of society after schooling ends. Another aspect of this law is the Service ré-éducatif ambulatoire (SREA), which requires an expert examination of a child, parent participation, and a decision about how to educate a child using input from parents, teachers, and the expert based on possible options (“European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education”). This system shows progress towards inclusive practices in Luxembourg as the law is beginning to address the issue, and practices are being implemented into classrooms to improve the education of all students.

Observations of inclusion in authentic settings, the language used in laws, and beliefs and values have clearly resulted in differences in the implementation and success of inclusion in both Europe and the United States. The lack of consistency reveals the complexities of inclusion and the barriers that still exist in terms of educating all children. Despite the differences, similarities between schools that use inclusion effectively are evident even across country lines. According to Kugelmass (2006), who studied inclusion in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Portugal, differences in the definition of inclusion exist, from serving children with disabilities in a general education setting to a broader definition that addresses issues such as race, social class, ethnicity, gender, and ability (p. 279). This view sees education as a human right that all children deserve, and seeks to teach according to this value. Inclusion, therefore, is made less complicated in terms of the overall goals.

Of the inclusive practices studied, Kugelmass (2006) observed many similarities. Despite three very different settings and classroom demographics, collaboration, collegiality, and compassion (p. 287) were commonalities that led to successful inclusion across schools. In addition, the teachers in all three settings realized they needed additional help and reached out to the community to meet these needs. Ultimately, by calling on parents, administrators, and other members of the community, teachers were able to face some of the challenges related to inclusion in the classroom (Kugelmass, 2006, p. 286). Another commonality was that each school “employed flexible instructional approaches that responded to the abilities, interests and needs of individual children” (p. 286). All of the qualities found in successful inclusive classroom settings reflect a culture that emphasizes and values inclusion for all students. Such a conclusion shows that dedication and commitment to that value can lead to more inclusion and more importantly, a better education for all students. Although differences may exist and the way in which inclusion is achieved can vary from classroom to classroom and country to country, if the overall goal remains the focus, all students will benefit from a more positive environment.

Comparing inclusive practices in the United States and Europe show tremendous differences in terms of laws and practices. In Austria, for example, although there is a push for inclusion, some classroom observations show that students with special needs are still being left behind. Other systems, however, have more detailed services and support for those with special needs. Regardless of differences in how inclusion is practiced in the classroom when it comes to instruction and technique, an awareness of and positive attitude towards students with disabilities has led to an improved education for students with special needs in both Europe and the United States. As both countries as well as world organizations continue to make inclusion a priority, movement toward inclusive practices will persist and improve.

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