

## EQUITY AND JUSTICE IN THE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION MODEL – THE CASE OF CHILDREN WITH HIGH ABILITIES

**Cristina NANU, Ph.D.,**

”1 Decembrie 1918” University, Alba Iulia,

[cristina.nanu@uab.ro](mailto:cristina.nanu@uab.ro)

**Abstract:** *This paper explores theories of social justice and equity in the inclusive education, focusing particularly on gifted learners as a marginalized group. While inclusive education has become central in addressing educational justice, its implementation is uneven, especially when it comes to children with high abilities. Giftedness lacks consistent recognition in policy and practice, leading to limited support structures compared to the area of disabilities. Teachers' attitudes toward the education of children with high abilities are shaped by concerns about elitism and a narrow focus on standardized achievement, often neglecting humanistic values such as acceptance of diversity. Although inclusive settings can benefit all students socially and academically, many educators feel unprepared to differentiate instruction effectively by balancing fairness, effort, and performance with limited resources. This dilemma reflects broader systemic issues in education policy, which continues to prioritize norm-based performance over individual progress. The paper argues that true inclusion requires both redistribution of resources and recognition of diversity of learners, but also a shift toward bottom-up approaches that empower teachers and learners and recognize giftedness as a developmental, context-sensitive phenomenon that deserves equitable educational support.*

**Keywords:** *educational justice; educational policy; equality; equity; giftedness; inclusive education.*

### Introduction

Inclusive education has often been regarded as a panacea for fostering social cohesion and addressing issues related to social justice and equity. Originally focused on the education of children with

disabilities, the concept of inclusion has since evolved to encompass all learners, emphasizing the importance of addressing individual differences. As defined by OECD (2003), inclusion now broadly refers to how education and training systems can expand their capacity to serve all learners equitably, respond to increasing diversity, maintain cultural richness, and enhance educational quality. While clear policies exist for students with disabilities, less attention is directed towards other marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities, migrants, or those with high abilities.

Gifted learners represent a group that, like students with disabilities, diverge from the norm in significant way. However, educational provisions for them remain limited, despite research indicating high rates of underachievement in this population (Raoof et al., 2024) and evidence showing that typical classes do not offer the cognitive challenge these children need (Plucker & Callahan, 2014). In Europe, although the European Council for High Ability has advocated for the rights of gifted students since 1987, and there is a consistent and continuous trend in advocating for educational provisions, education policies are scarce and vary significantly across Europe. Some countries (e.g., Portugal, Spain, Slovakia) recognize gifted children as a distinct group requiring tailored educational strategies, while others (e.g., Norway) avoid labelling them altogether. Moreover, terminology differs not only across countries but also over time within the same country. For instance, in Romania, the 2007 Education Law referred to them as "gifted children, capable of high performance," whereas later laws in 2011 and 2023 omit the term "gifted". These inconsistencies highlight the socially constructed nature of giftedness, shaped by broader policy frameworks and cultural values. Given the subjective and context-dependent understanding of giftedness, this analysis will explore the challenges of applying the inclusion model to gifted education, drawing on theories of equity-equality goal-oriented model (Espinoza, 2007) and social justice (Jencks, 1988; Power, 2012).

### **Equity-equality goal-oriented model**

Espinoza (2007) argues that in societies where educational systems prioritize efficiency by maximizing outcomes at minimum cost, it is difficult to have equity in education. In the proposed equity-equality model, Espinoza seeks to clarify the distinction between these concepts by examining how they apply across different stages of the educational process, including resource allocation, access to education, educational attainment, educational achievement based on test performance and occupation as post-education outcome. According to Espinoza,

equality assumes that all students should be treated identically, an assumption that can perpetuate existing disparities. In contrast, equity acknowledges differences in students' backgrounds, abilities, and environment, and aims to provide differentiated support to enable all students to achieve comparable levels of success. While equality of resources may refer to the absence of political, social, or cultural barriers to education, equity involves providing appropriate resources tailored to the needs of individuals with similar characteristics. This often requires unequal support. However, due to the wide range of learner profiles in inclusive classrooms, ensuring both equality and fairness becomes increasingly complex.

When it comes to educational attainment and achievement, most education systems aim to reduce the gap between low and high performers. Research suggests that inclusive education supports this goal, especially for disadvantaged students. For instance, a review by Thomas (2013) shows that reduced segregation in schools correlates with higher achievement among marginalized groups. Yet, when it comes to "outliers" such as students with severe learning difficulties, those from vastly different cultural backgrounds, or highly gifted learners, standard comparisons to group averages may be inequitable and uninformative. In special education, such comparisons have increasingly been replaced by a response to intervention approach, which aims to profile students based on the individual characteristics of their learning potential (Björn et al., 2015). A similar approach could benefit gifted children. For example, Stanley's (1973) curriculum acceleration model demonstrated that gifted learners could master one year school subject content in just three weeks of intensive instruction. Renzulli (2011) also found that gifted students often begin the school year already knowing up to 50% of the curriculum, suggesting that instruction for these students should instead focus on enrichment activities. Espinoza's model plays an important role in promoting justice in education by arguing that equal treatment is not always fair. However, inequality will always create some other forms of injustice that have to be temporarily accepted until those disadvantaged in the past achieve equity (Espinoza, 2007).

### **Models of educational justice**

Education policies are generally designed to address various forms of social injustice by striving to reduce educational inequalities. However, what is understood by justice in education varies widely and there is not one clear-cut solution to diminish potential injustice. The most traditional and widely adopted approach is ensuring equal

opportunities through a redistribution of resources, such as providing free education or allocating additional support to socio-economically disadvantaged groups (Power, 2012). While this distributive justice model is effective in diminishing the impact of socio-economic deprivation on children's education, it has limitations in supporting all learners to reach their full potential. Meyer (2020) argued that educational prospects can't be equalized when it comes to unequal talents. The unequal distribution of resources to support lower achieving students can disadvantage learners with high abilities, leading to new forms of educational injustice. While it is widely recognized that children with disabilities cannot meet their potential through equal access to educational resources and more is needed, it is difficult to justify that high ability children are in the same situation. They are considered by many a privileged minority and giftedness is perceived as a protective factor against academic failure (Moon, 2009). This perception is further reinforced by a lack of scientific understanding of giftedness among the general population, coupled with a long-standing emphasis on supporting individuals who struggle to achieve due to various disabilities.

Distributive justice model has attracted criticism, even from marginalized communities themselves, due to the stigma and labelling it often entails. Critics argue that distributive justice may lead to cultural injustice by implying a problem within individuals or communities. To address these shortcomings, two responses have emerged in the literature: one involves deconstructing categories that justify the redistribution of resources, and the other promotes affirmative recognition of marginalized groups (Power, 2012). This shift is obvious in terminology: for instance, "children with deficiencies" became "children with special needs," and "gifted children" were renamed as "children with high learning potential" with the term gifted removed from the label.

Both, the politics of redistribution and the politics of recognition are largely top-down approaches that often fail to give voice to the very populations they aim to support. Meyer (2020) argues that individuals should have the right to make their own decisions regarding their self-fulfilment. Every person has the right to autonomy and control over their own life. Thus, the main issue should not be whether children are placed in segregated or inclusive settings, but whether they are meaningfully involved in decisions that affect their educational path. In this sense, inclusion should not be seen as the only acceptable solution, but rather as one of several options, emphasizing choice as a core principle. Reflecting this shift, contemporary education policies

increasingly prioritize the political rights of target groups through bottom-up approaches. These so-called politics of representation aim to empower individuals by fostering agency, expanding citizen choice, and encouraging greater community participation.

### **Giftedness and gifted education**

The need for personal agency is reflected in how giftedness is currently defined. Renzulli (2011) expanded the traditional concept of giftedness by including not only ability, but also creativity and personal involvement. Similarly, Sterneberg (2003) emphasized that giftedness involves a combination of high intelligence, creativity and wisdom, highlighting that intellectual potential alone is insufficient for talent to manifest itself. Developmental theories of giftedness further highlight the critical role of environmental factors in transforming innate potential into high performance (Barab & Plucker, 2002; Gagné, 2005). This emphasis on contextual factors draws attention on the relevance of effective educational provisions.

Worldwide, there is large variation in learning settings addressing the needs of gifted children. In some countries, such as South Korea, segregated educational settings for gifted students are preferred. However, this approach has sparked significant debate, as grouping gifted students separately is often criticized as elitist and lacking equitable access. Interestingly, while parents of children with disabilities typically advocate for inclusive settings, parents of gifted children often prefer specialized programs or gifted group placements. Research, including OECD reports, shows that selective schools can provide not only cognitive but also social and emotional benefits for gifted students, helping them to reach their full potential (Rutigliano & Quarshie, 2021). Despite this, segregated programs remain relatively uncommon, and the prevailing trend across many countries is towards inclusive education supplemented with enrichment opportunities or accelerated learning through access to higher grade level content. In this context, differentiating instruction in inclusive settings is seen as a key strategy in supporting gifted students. Without specialized training or external support, general education teachers are often unprepared in addressing the needs of gifted learners. A comprehensive survey by Tourón and Freeman (2017), involving 324 scholars and practitioners from various European countries, revealed that gifted education policies are often vague, screening processes are intentionally avoided, selection criteria are unclear, and teachers frequently lack the competencies required to support gifted students effectively. Notably, respondents from the same countries often gave inconsistent answers,

reflecting a widespread lack of awareness about national policies. Many did, however, point to a range of enrichment opportunities available through extracurricular activities, suggesting that in some contexts, gifted education is developing through bottom-up initiatives rather than formal policy frameworks.

### **Teachers' ethical dilemmas in inclusive settings**

In an inclusive setting, teachers carry a significant responsibility, and many of their decisions are shaped by subjective interpretations of justice. With large class sizes still common, differentiating instruction becomes a complex and demanding task. Within this context, there are lots of subjective choices teachers make for a more inclusive environment, choices related to personal understanding of fairness and equity. Jenks (1988) argues that teachers navigate a range of educational dilemmas by negotiating between competing conceptions of justice, such as democratic equality, moralistic justice, humanistic justice, and utilitarianism. For instance, a teacher guided by democratic equality may strive to distribute time and attention equally among all students. However, the diversity present in most classrooms quickly reveals the limitations of this approach, as students have varying needs that require differentiated responses. A teacher adopting a moralistic perspective might prioritize students who put in more effort, rewarding diligence with additional support. From a humanistic standpoint, the teacher might instead choose to give more attention to students perceived as disadvantaged. Although gifted children can also be considered disadvantaged—especially when their needs are overlooked—in practice, they are often deprioritized in favour of students with learning difficulties (Sambuis & Bourdin, 2024). This creates a dilemma: teachers aim to remove barriers to inclusion and provide equal opportunities for all, but limited time and resources force them to make difficult decisions about where to direct their focus. Jenks (1988) argues that the need to move the whole group forward pushes the teacher to reward not just the effort but also the performance. If teachers' involvement is assessed by the performance students make, it might be tempted to focus on students who move forward at a higher pace. Balancing these competing demands can lead to ethical dilemmas. For example, a teacher guided by humanistic justice seeks to reduce disparities among students, while one leaning toward utilitarian principles may aim to maximize overall classroom achievement, even if this means focusing on the highest performers. This tension makes it tempting for teachers to invest more in students who show the greatest potential for success.

**Teachers' perceptions and beliefs about inclusion of gifted learners**

In a review of 26 studies examining primary school teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education, de Boer et al. (2011) found that most teachers held either neutral or negative views. While parents tend to be more supportive of inclusion, this is usually associated with concerns regarding the ability of teachers to effectively individualize instruction. When it comes to giftedness, teachers' knowledge and beliefs significantly shape their attitudes. Some perceive special provisions for gifted students as promoting elitism within schools (Heuser et al., 2017). However, a more recent systematic review by Sambuis and Bourdin (2024) revealed that teachers are generally aware of the specific needs of gifted learners and often favour inclusive practices over acceleration and ability grouping. Previous experience with gifted students and self-efficacy seems to matter. Despite this, many teachers continue to equate support for gifted learners with academic achievement alone, often overlooking the broader humanistic values that inclusion seeks to promote, such as embracing diversity, encouraging open dialogue, fostering acceptance, and nurturing mutual support. Interestingly, the presence of gifted students in the classroom may have a positive impact on their peers; for example, Balestra et al. (2020) documented such benefits in their research.

Positive attitudes toward inclusion are typically found among educators who prioritize these broader values and shift their focus from norm-based achievement to individual strengths and potential. Toson et al. (2012), in a qualitative study exploring the link between the capability approach and inclusive educational leadership, found that school leaders who embraced this philosophy made decisions based on students' individual needs rather than rigid curriculum standards. These leaders fostered more inclusive environments and viewed diversity not as a technical challenge, but as a philosophical and moral issue. In this light, the guiding question shifts from How can we meet curriculum standards? to How should schools determine what is best for each student?

**Conclusions**

Equity-equality goal-oriented model and theories of educational justice provide a valuable framework for analysing the complexity of inclusive education of children with high abilities by emphasizing the importance of adopting a person-centred pedagogy when considering issues such as resource allocation, access to education and student achievement. The theoretical foundations developed in the context of

educating children with disabilities can be meaningfully extended to address equity and justice for all learners, including those with exceptional abilities. However, the unequal distribution of resources necessary to achieve equity often disadvantages gifted students, largely due to policy imbalances favouring students with disabilities and persistent misconceptions about giftedness and academic success held by educators and society at large.

Theories of educational justice point towards subjective choices teachers make while differentiating instruction, highlighting the need for deeper expertise and awareness of marginalized groups such as gifted learners. While pro-inclusion movement seems to get traction and is on the politically correct agenda of decision makers in education, a significant gap persists in the expertise of general education teachers, many of them remaining sceptical about the practical effectiveness of inclusion in general. One major barrier might be the emphasis on standardized academic achievement, which often overshadows the broader personal and social benefits of inclusive education. Current educational policies that prioritize norm-referenced assessment discourage a shift toward individualized, progress-based assessment. If teacher performance is measured by average group outcomes, educators will have little incentive to invest extra time and resources in supporting diverse learners, especially when doing so may not translate into improved results at the group level. The decision to focus on the individual student might be also related to teacher status. In countries where teachers are not trusted and not given credit for what they are doing, there is a natural need to justify their performance by relying on students' performance at the group level. Usually, in this kind of systems, teachers are asked to fill in lots of paper about their work. Competition is reinforced at any level, undermining collaboration and inclusion.

True inclusion, however, goes beyond classroom walls. If inclusive classrooms are to reflect the values of a democratic society, such as mutual respect, equity, and shared responsibility, then all members of that society must feel genuinely included. Implementing inclusive practices in schools without corresponding changes in the broader social and institutional environment risks reducing inclusion to a superficial exercise with limited impact on community level equity and justice.

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