Doing difference differently? Exploring inclusion at an elementary school in Austria

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to highlight a paradox between inclusion/exclusion at the level of the organisation and classroom practices, as well as between general and disability/special educational needs (SEN)-specific approaches to diversity in the classroom. The authors recommend better alignment between school policies and teaching practices to offer all students an equal chance to benefit from inclusive pedagogies.

Design/methodology/approach – This study analyses a school that has gained public reputation as an innovative, inclusive school in Austria. Applying a case study with an ethnographic methodological approach, the authors explore what strategies are implemented to become more inclusive at the level of school organisation and classroom practices? What are the pedagogical beliefs and actions relating to diversity that drive inclusive efforts? How is this school's general approach to diversity enacted with students with SEN?

Findings – The findings show that context-specific circumstances shape inclusive school development, which comes with a set of affordances and challenges. The authors argue that in this case, striving for inclusion indicated two ways of "doing difference differently". First, the school has built on many cornerstones of inclusion when relating and responding to student diversity, that was remarkably different than in other mainstream schools in Austria. On the contrary, while creating new educational and pedagogical norms, it also recycled conventional segregating tendencies, and as such, reproduced hierarchised difference, but in other ways than schools typically do in mainstream schooling.

Originality/value – This school and its pedagogical mission have never been analysed through the rich data that two researchers were able to gather and work through.

Keywords Diversity, Inclusion, Pedagogy, Teachers, Classroom practice, School organisation

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Creating a school "for all" is a challenge for leadership (Kugelmass and Ainscow, 2004), due to many elements of schooling affected by the paradigm shift of inclusion. Key challenges entail teaching strategies, group organisation, allocation of personal support opportunities, social relations within the school and building connections with families and neighbourhoods (Ainscow *et al.*, 2012, p. 198). Under the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals and preceded by the United Nations, 2006 UN Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the call for inclusive education has been reinforced globally. These universal inclusion policy projects have placed the global North and South at very unequal starting points to implement and enact schools "for all" (Artiles, 2020; Donohue and Bornmann, 2014). Nonetheless, the core themes (multiple ability classrooms, teachers grappling with reform and change and school leadership) resonate with any school community, attempting to bring children into the mainstream that were formerly segregated (Kamenoupoulo, 2020; Engelbrecht *et al.*, 2016; Elder, 2023).

In this article, we illustrate the case of one school in Austria that reflects common struggles in education systems around the world related to access, resources and differentiation when it comes to transforming a school towards inclusion. Taking an ethnographic approach, we present the case of "Bricklane", an elementary school that tries to "do difference differently" by implementing a pedagogical mission, breaking away from traditional ways of teaching to respond to diversity. While typically it is non-public schools that undergo such transformation, Bricklane has remained a public institution available to any child in the catchment area. For this reason, Bricklane deserves to be documented as it provides a unique setting to study organisational and pedagogical innovation in view of inclusivity. Hence, we aim to understand the complexities involved in creating inclusive schools by asking: What are the specific strategies Bricklane employs to become inclusive at the level of school organisation and classroom practices? What are the pedagogical beliefs and actions related to diversity, driving school practitioners' inclusive efforts? And how is this general diversity approach enacted when it comes to the domain of disability/special educational needs (SEN)?

Investigating Bricklane, we show how striving for inclusion in specific contexts becomes an act of "doing difference differently" that comes with affordances and challenges. The findings, while generated from a particular case and not generalisable, are useful to other contexts as they invite researchers, policy makers and practitioners to critically think about local schools that attempt to chart new territory with the global goal of inclusion.

Literature review

School development for inclusion

While several factors play into developing inclusive schools, international research has indicated that management and leadership are indispensable in envisioning and initiating change (Booth and Ainscow, 2002; Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020; Hoppey and McLeskey, 2013; Mac Ruairc *et al.*, 2013; Schratz, 2003). Booth and Ainscow (2002, p. 15) described that successful school development hinges on the involvement of class teachers and senior staff. While teachers and students foster practices that contribute to inclusive school cultures, it is

the leadership team that has to hold educators accountable for their participation in the project of inclusion (McLeskey and Waldron, 2015, p. 68). On classroom level, inclusive schools are not only about the presence of diverse students; they also seek to improve student outcomes in response to individual challenges. Furthermore, McLeskey and Waldron name the importance of professional development for teachers focusing on student-centred pedagogies (p. 72). Disabilities/SEN have been at the forefront of inclusive school development programs due to the UNCRPD (2006) in Austria. Furthermore, the unique needs of migrant and refugee children have added to the growing demands placed on schools to develop innovative pedagogies (Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020, p. 523; Norberg, 2017). However, it seems challenging for school leadership to harmonise responses at the level of school policies and pedagogical practices. Structurally, Ainscow *et al.* (2012, p. 198) mention the demographics of a catchment area, histories and cultures of the student population and its socio-economic resources as factors, affecting different ways in which inclusive efforts are envisioned and enacted (Waitoller and Annamma, 2017).

Similarly, UNESCO's policy recommendations for inclusive schools highlight some of these issues common to most national frameworks. UNESCO remarks that legislation often lacked a detailed program of inclusion, that allocating funding remains challenging, and that holistic school approaches to inclusion were largely missing (2009, pp. 22–23). Recent work continues to find that a "whole-school approach" to working with inclusive policies was integral to building inclusive schools (Kinsella, 2020, p. 1352). Óskarsdóttir *et al.* (2020) highlight: where school leadership treats reforms with sincerity, it can better motivate their staff to implement change (p. 529). On the micro-level of transforming the everyday life of schools, this entails that teachers treat every student as a learner in their classroom, that educators collaborate and that personalisation becomes central to lesson planning and teaching (Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020, p. 531).

Inclusive pedagogies in the classroom

Diversity approaches in schools can be described as addressing diversity in general or in a domain-specific (e.g. language and religion) manner (Konings *et al.*, 2023). Scholarship categorises diversity approaches in many ways (see Celeste *et al.*, 2019; Civitillo *et al.*, 2017; Hathaway and Fletcher, 2018; Rodríguez-Izquierdo *et al.*, 2020; Szelei *et al.*, 2019), commonly highlighting that not all reflect inclusion. Inclusive pedagogies are educational responses to students' needs in teaching and learning, while avoiding marginalisation and stigmatisation (Florian and Beaton, 2018, p. 870). Hence, extreme differentiation strategies may turn exclusive, even when students attend the same classroom (Florian and Beaton, 2018). In inclusive settings, labelling students according to SEN diagnoses is the most common strategy to identify needs and offer targeted support. Labelling might ensure that students receive one-on-one teaching with a SEN educator or placement in SEN tracks. This dilemma of labelling students to mobilise support has been discussed widely (Demetriou, 2022; Arishi *et al.*, 2017). It remains one of the pressing issues in mainstream education: supporting without confining students to deficit notions.

Inclusive pedagogies refer to teachers' beliefs, designs and actions (Gale *et al.*, 2017), each embedded in the principles of social inclusion. Action describes concrete practices or strategies, design denotes the ordering, timing and arrangement of actions and belief refers to seeing students as knowledgeable assets instead of deficits (Gale *et al.*, 2017; pp. 349–351). The underlying principles across the three components of pedagogical work imply that students, in all their differences, are valuable, and that schools avoid an agenda of correcting, disciplining or patronising (Gale *et al.*, 2017).

Previous research also finds that teachers and schools are not necessarily inclusive in all domains of diversity: they may be more invested in one over another, depending on beliefs, training, experience, resources and support (Bešić *et al.*, 2020, Silverman, 2010). In this vein, we take a layered approach to diversity. First, we treat it as an umbrella term, signalling a wide spectrum of "difference", and analyse how diversity is seen in Bricklane's general pedagogical vision and actions. Second, we focus on the SEN domain of diversity to illustrate congruences and mismatches between general and specific beliefs and actions towards heterogeneous classrooms.

Bricklane in the Austrian public school system

Since 1993, education policies in Austria have awarded schools with greater autonomy, including more responsibilities for principals and school leadership regarding budget, resources, training, staff and pedagogical decision-making (Schratz and Hartmann, 2019). The shift from a centrally organised school system to one, allowing for place-based management has required a fundamental shift in principals' attitudes and profiles (Wiesner, *et al.*, 2015). Schratz and Hartmann point out that principals remain hesitant to develop holistic visions for school transformation. Instead, they focus on implementing smaller changes, centring efforts on individual initiatives or teachers (2019, p. 120). School development for inclusion, then, provides a crucial area for leadership qualities in Austria.

At Bricklane, school leadership made use of the trend towards greater school autonomy. The principal implemented a pedagogical mission which includes all students on the basis of working with personalised learning schedules for each child. Usually, students with SEN in Austria are educated in special schools or receive instruction in pull-out classes if the school works inclusively. As a result of the principal's efforts to navigate local funding opportunities, Bricklane received a financial endowment to support its innovative approach. Consequently, the school has moved into a spacious and modern building, and is able to afford high-quality teaching materials.

Material and methods

Study context and methodological approach

This article is part of a larger project European Doctorate in Teacher Education (EDiTE), within which the authors conducted two individual, qualitative school studies broadly on the topic of teachers' understandings and practices of diversity and inclusion. This project was approved by the ethics adviser of the University of Innsbruck, appointed by EDiTE to monitor and report ethics issues to the Research Executive Agency. All interviewees signed letters of consent.

We apply a case study with an ethnographic approach (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019, O'Reilly, 2009; Stake, 1995) to shed light on the inner mechanisms and meanings that a particular context presents regarding broader cultural, social and educational issues (Evers, 2016; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). This means we situate Bricklane in the global phenomenon of schools trying to become inclusive. Our intention is not to declare Bricklane uncritically as an "inclusive school", but to offer a thick description and analysis (Evers, 2016) of the meanings and practices Bricklane uses as part of its way of "becoming inclusive". We then discuss these context-specific findings in light of larger social phenomena and patterns globally (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019) around inclusive school development and pedagogies. We approach educational and pedagogical practices in the single case of Bricklane with regard to their own intrinsic value (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; Stake, 1995), and do not claim generalisability. The findings, however, are useful for other contexts as they can be taken as starting points to think critically about

one's own educational practices. We selected Bricklane purposefully because it stood out from mainstream institutions (Thomas, 2011). Its distinctiveness was initially identified by its self-established reputation of being a "successful inclusive school", reflected both in its pedagogical mission (breaking with traditional concepts of teaching and learning), and student population (culturally and linguistically diverse, and accepting students with SEN). Bricklane's pedagogical mission statement highlighted its dedication to include all students, even those who were expelled from other schools.

Data collection
Both authors conducted fieldwork at Bricklane at different times (May 2017- May 2018). In this article, we draw on our combined interview material and the first authors' observations of teachers' classroom practices, school events, extracurricular activities and school documents. Altogether, 50 h of participant observations were conducted (Erickson, 1985), and registered in rich and detailed fieldnotes (Emerson *et al.*, 2011). School documents were gathered via searching public websites. These documents were read for further information on the school's basic educational vision and used for case descriptions.

Participants
We interviewed three teachers (Kathrin, Mark and Sylvia), a teaching assistant (TA) (Theo) and the principal (Ms Straus). All names used in this article are pseudonyms. Kathrin and Mark were co-teachers in one multigrade class, whereas Sylvia and Theo were teachers and TAs. Kathrin had more than 30 years of teaching experience. She spent 13 of those years at Bricklane. Mark started his career as teacher at Bricklane three years ago. Sylvia had been a teacher for nine years, working for seven years at Bricklane, while Theo had worked as a swimming teacher previously and was trying to obtain more permanent employment as TA. Theo worked in Sylvia's class, supporting a student with intellectual challenges and therefore qualified as a student with SEN.

Analysis
The analysis began with an independent reading of data sources, keeping the research questions in mind and taking analytical memos in the process. After this, the authors discussed a shared analytical strategy which they applied to the data set. Driven by the research questions, this analytical process involved three key steps. First, we analysed data based on the first two research questions and categorised educational and pedagogical practices on the organisational level (regulating school admission policy, partnerships with parents, leadership, collective commitment and expertise of the teaching staff) and classroom level (e.g. differentiation, scaffolding, personal learning projects, co-teaching, organising social activities, relying on TA). Each practice was seen as embedded in beliefs about diversity; therefore, we also identified what aspects of diversity were explicitly mentioned or made visible as school practitioners talked about/carried out their practices (e.g. culture, ethnicity, language, ability, socio-economic status), and how this diversity was positioned, organised and viewed in teachers' work (e.g. an asset, resource, a problem). To respond to *RQ3*, we focused on the close examination of teacher–student interactions in classroom settings regarding students with SEN. We further analysed how the general vision and practices that Bricklane developed regarding inclusion showed in the classroom. We contrasted practices and beliefs that were general with those that were a domain-specific approach to SEN.

While we initially categorised the data, we keep with the reporting style of case studies and tell about the findings in a holistic manner (Erickson, 1977). This means that we

approach analytical categories and identified teacher-student interactions as intertwined in school life, not as separate units, and therefore, report about them as recontextualised in the larger description of the school case.

Findings: doing difference differently at Bricklane

Bricklane was situated in an urban environment, located in Western Austria. While remaining a public institution, it applied an innovative school-wide pedagogy, making it distinctly different from other public schools in the city. Educational initiatives included: personal learning projects, German-Italian bilingual teaching, multigrade classes (6- to 12-year-old students as a "family" in one class), and co-teaching. Implementing personal learning meant the organisation of personal working sessions instead of traditional whole-class teaching in regular lessons. All teachers, working at Bricklane, taught in this way. Due to its innovative character, Bricklane enjoyed a good reputation in the public eye and became relatively well-known across the city, to the extent that some families "found ways" (Raggl, 2019, p. 260) to avoid the catchment area rule that applies across Austria (Bericht des Rechnungshofes [Report of the Austrian Supreme Audit Office], 2018, p. 27) and sent their children to Bricklane. The school's commitment to its unique pedagogy and values was reflected in highly qualified teachers who acquired the state licence for teaching, complemented by a specialised pedagogy degree. The school day for all of its 230 students ran until 4 p.m. with lessons interspersed until the school ended. Other schools in the area ran until roughly 1 p.m. Some schools offered afternoon care for younger pupils, but not for all. Hence, Bricklane provided quality child care for families, enabling both parents to work full-time.

Making a difference in the school organisation? Choosing teachers, parents and students

In school practitioners' accounts we identified four organisational features that the participants attributed to the uniqueness of Bricklane. These were changes to the rule of admission by catchment area; partnerships with parents; the principal's motivating and leading actions; and the collective commitments and high pedagogical abilities of the teaching staff. Due to Bricklane's popularity, many parents wanted their children in this school, and several parents (Kathrin called them "well-known") had "found ways" to sign up their children at Bricklane, bypassing the catchment area regulation. Eventually about half of the school population came from different districts. This meant that existing diversity in the neighbourhood was, at the level of school admissions, regulated as the school saw fit. The principal explained:

> One-third of the children are from well-situated families, academics, professors and surgeons; one-third is made up of the middle class, German-speaking and well-educated families from abroad; and one-third of the children come from families that are illiterate. (Ms. Straus)

While there was awareness that different socio-economic groups had to be kept in equilibrium in school composition, Bricklane also admitted children who were not welcome in other schools. This showed a clear openness in how Bricklane viewed diversity in behaviour and learning, even though it was strict about regulating the overall numbers of children, experiencing challenging circumstances:

> But there are many children who are not in our neighbourhood. And sometimes it is the case that we get children during the year. Because "oh, in this school, it doesn't work", so they come to us. (Mark)

They [formerly expelled students] are too disturbing or naughty so we take them. But there can't be too many of these types of children in one class because then the atmosphere shifts and that's not good. (Ms Straus)

Hence, staff saw a balance between different "types of children" as an underpinning principle of Bricklane's admission policy and teachers' effective pedagogical work. This selective approach may signal that to become an innovative school and to effectively implement inclusive pedagogies, student diversity must be regulated at a structural level. This, however, creates tensions between the development of inclusive policies at the school level and practices in the classroom.

Another organisational feature was Bricklane's unique strategic partnership with parents. The school had a Elternverein (parents' club) which "supports the school", as Ms Straus explained: "The parents, for example, help to fund the winter sports week". The parents' club alleviated some of the financial strain that winter sports can put on family budgets as it worked through financial donations and the lending and exchanging of equipment for sport activities. Ms Straus explained:

Every child in this area goes skiing in the winter but we have children who would never go skiing because their parents don't do that and they don't have money for it. So the parents' club steps in and finances [the trips] so everyone can go into the mountains to ski.

Staff also noted the leading role of the principal in driving the school's success. The principal's actions were endorsed as being pedagogically visionary, expecting hard work from all teachers and making strategic moves to secure funding while remaining a public school. For example:

[. . .] she (*the principal*) is the one who always starts with something new. If there is anything new, she will do it. And so, we do it, too. And that's why this school is very popular. (Kathrin)

She is like, like she is selling something. "If you want me to make a perfect school which is a star in Austria, I need money from you, things and so on". And she is perfect in this. And as she is full of wishes, she is very, very [. . .] convincing! (Mark)

The teachers also identified a collective pedagogical vision and teachers' dedication as being necessary within the collaborative teams. Teaching at Bricklane meant embracing the principles of an innovative pedagogy, being able to quickly learn and adapt to new ways of teaching, working and collaborating. Committed to these expectations, Kathrin, who had taught at Bricklane before Ms Straus became principal, noted:

And you have to have the same visions in this school. Or you have to move on. Because it's necessary that you go in the same direction and at the same speed, she (*the principal*) is quite "tak-tak-tak" (*imitating orderly sound*) [. . .] But I'm, I guess the only one, (thinking to herself:) there's no way [. . .] There are two [teachers] from the elder team who are here right now. (Kathrin)

Summing up, Bricklane's inclusive school development built on several organisational features. We identify skilful leadership with a principal who seizes the local opportunities for realising her vision for an inclusive school, whilst navigating diversity parameters through regulating the overall student body (Schratz, 2003, p. 406). Capital seems to play a considerable role, as redistribution of funds only works out if families donate assets which are then redistributed so that everyone can participate in activities.

Furthermore, regarding students' abilities and behaviour, the principal values the deliberate composition of classes, taking in children expelled from other institutions. However, "finding ways" to avoid the catchment-area rule, as some parents did, meant that the context factors of the neighbourhood were manipulated and Bricklane's population was

not coincidental, but carefully selected. Therefore, school leadership took certain liberties by granting access to some students and denying it to others. This way, Bricklane did experience the pressures common to urban centres across Austria, where families more often struggled financially [Bundesministerium Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung (Ed), 2021, pp. 176–184], but mitigated these factors through its own admission policy as it understood and deployed social class.

Furthermore, Bricklane showed that it could develop a "whole-school approach" (Kinsella, 2020, p. 1352; Schratz and Hartmann, 2019). All educators at Bricklane were trained in personalised pedagogy and had formed teams which were held accountable for adherence to the principal's vision of inclusive education. This way, Ms Straus created coherence between the school's policy and classroom teaching. While this proportional approach to student admission created a spectrum of diversity, it filtered neighbourhood diversity. It allowed affluent families from outside the school district to enrol despite official regulation, dictating the contrary. This school admission policy regulated socio-spatial circumstances and shaped who could not access the benefits of an innovative pedagogy: an outcome which is in clear opposition to teachers' generally inclusive views in the classroom.

Making a difference and making differences? From valuing to sidelining diversity in the classroom

General approaches to diversity. At Bricklane, diversity was recognised as normal and natural to humans. Teachers considered "differences" as the standard modality and deemed it their responsibility to respond to heterogeneity adequately. An explanation for these differences based on social and cultural belonging was not particularly emphasised, and instead teachers focused on students' individual characteristics. Teachers recognised differences in age, ability, learning ability/speed, behaviour, migration background, country of origin, cultural difference in traditions and languages. All these domains of diversity were seen as valuable, as can be seen here:

> One person is older than another, one is from another country, one has another background, one has a [. . .] it's an easy learning child, the other not. So, each one is different in a different way (Kathrin).

Particularly in terms of migration, culture and language, Kathrin and Mark rejected deficit views. For instance:

> It's not a challenge in this way you say 'Oh how can we do this with this child, how should we work with him?' I would say it's a win-win situation. (Mark)

In practitioners' conceptions of pedagogy, diversity was not seen as a disruption or an inconvenience but it informed teachers' planning. At the same time, teachers did not depict teaching in diverse contexts as an easy task and referred to it as "hard work" that could not be avoided or wished away.

In Bricklane, we mainly observed two types of pedagogical actions that teachers related to diversity: personal learning projects, and organisation of social activities to promote social and emotional competences. Bricklane rejected uniform teaching as it regarded students as unique individuals. In pedagogical practice, this philosophy translated into personal learning sessions. Curricular learning happened via "free working sessions" (*Freiarbeit*), facilitated by the two class teachers of each group and based upon the students' personal learning plans. These personal projects, while accommodating the individual needs of each student, set high academic expectations and demanded the same academic outcome for every student by the end of fourth grade (end of elementary school in Austria).

The learning environment had several corners, materials, spaces and learning resources from which the students could choose during the working sessions. The students also moved around independently, sat at tables, went to the computer or took a mat and sat on the floor in the corridor outside the classroom during free working sessions. This freedom to choose learning environments and materials strengthened learner autonomy, while still enabling the attainment of personal academic learning goals. The students had playful material that they manipulated for sensory learning, although the teachers insisted that material and "free time" was focused on "working" instead of "playing". Teachers applied freedom and the playful use of sensory resources to engage each child with what they had to learn every day.

Bricklane took pride in their vision of seeing every child as unique, and staff perceived their practice of personalised learning as successful for all children's development and inclusion. When Mark and Kathrin were asked why they implemented this type of personal learning project specifically, they reasoned:

Mark: Because it's the only way that it works. Because also there is difference between integration and inclusion because there are classes who say they are integration classes and there the children are integrated in a class, but if you work with them, they have another teacher [. . .].

Kathrin: [. . .] and another place [. . .].

Mark: [. . .] place, hours, "go now to this" [. . .] and we focus on inclusion. And inclusion only works if you have personal learning because [. . .], if everyone has to do the same sheet of paper, there's no [. . .] it's no [. . .] there's no way for inclusion.

These teacher beliefs and practices reflect many aspects of inclusive pedagogies. First of all, difference was not considered a burden, but a natural feature of every individual that teachers could only respond to appropriately if they did so in an individual and personalised way. Second, educators had a clear understanding of what inclusion meant to them [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2009] by differentiating inclusive education from integration. They equated inclusive education with personalised learning as it allowed for the spatial proximity of all learners, whereas integration relied on the occasional separation of students, working with special educators. The all-day setting and the rich learning environment facilitated a view of students that spoke to their individuality as learners whose productivity might vary throughout the day, and whose areas of strengths and weakness differed, as did their sensory access to process information. Hence, great effort was placed on understanding each student as different in their own way to avoid stigmatisation and marginalisation (Florian and Beaton, 2018). Next, we analyse how these general visions of diversity were enacted in the specific case of a student with SEN.

Approaching students with special educational needs. Ms Straus abstained from labelling kids according to SEN categories. Therefore, children were rarely diagnosed and their teachers did not discuss students' performances with regard to SEN labels. Bricklane also pursued this approach to destigmatising SEN in the way its educators were called. The staff of the school included regular teachers, counsellor teachers for children, displaying behavioural problems or learning difficulties, and five special educators by training. These special educators were, however, deliberately referred to as regular teachers, taking up co-teaching responsibilities on an equal basis with the subject-trained ones. This strategy was supposed to reduce the power imbalances among differently-trained educators that can be observed in newly inclusive schools (Wagner, 2023).

In Sylvia and Theo's "integration class" there were several children who, it was suspected, had learning difficulties. For one student, Peter, the school had employed a TA to work with him. Theo, a former swimming teacher, helped Peter to rein in his physical drive, encouraging him to go to the gym when Peter showed signs of unrest, or motivating him to run laps together outside. While Peter participated in personalised working sessions just like others, Sylvia stressed that there were children who immediately began their work and did not need much support. While "Peter is someone who refuses a lot of the times tasks and activities" which made this pedagogical style of independent, personalised work difficult to maintain with him. Sylvia was concerned about Peter's behaviour as he scared other children, and his educators needed to keep an eye on him. They supervised Peter not to give curricular support, but to monitor his adaptability to the group. Bricklane's pedagogical approach stressed autonomy and teachers as facilitators: this approach disagreed with Peter who required more support and monitoring so that his teachers' accounts made him seem to become "other". The division of labour among his educators seemed to shift, as one of our fieldnotes shows.

> Later in class, the teachers scold Peter, telling him to be quiet as he makes inappropriate noises. Theo steps in, engages Peter with work and checks his tasks. (FN-2017)

While Sylvia often disciplined Peter, Theo seemed to take over the pedagogical tasks of motivating, engaging and checking Peter's work. Indeed, the guidance of the TA was crucial to Peter's curricular learning, behaviour and social interactions in the classroom. While Theo supervised Peter's individual activities, Bricklane's educators upheld values of achievement for the rest of the class. However, when Theo was not around, expectations of Peter's learning achievements were compromised. For example:

> Peter practices writing a specific letter, he focuses on his work throughout the lesson. During break the teachers comment on Peter's work: "He [Peter] is behaving quite well today although Theo [teaching assistant] isn't with him.' "Yes", says Sylvia. "Yesterday, I said that I was glad if he [Peter] only sits around and is calm by himself – that would be enough for me" (FN-2017).

Bricklane's general approach to diversity (personal projects), was challenged by Peter. Sylvia relied on Theo for assisting not only Peter but also for enabling her to devote more attention to other children. In the moment described above, she had no other expectations of Peter than to be present but calm. Sylvia and Theo found a way to keep Peter involved with the group due to the many moments in which they disappeared for a run and return to work on Peter's individual task. Free working sessions offered a way to treat these moments without stigma and added attention.

Bricklane's strong vision for social and emotional learning and creating a sense of community was also somewhat challenged in Peter's case. In fact, he seemed to become ostracised among his peers. Theo had become an important connector between Peter and the rest of the students, describing Peter as follows:

> Peter's intelligence level is average to high, his classmates accept him – he is more the type who pushes them away, hits them. (Theo)

> While we talked with Theo some of the other kids approached us, they teased Theo a little, joked around. One boy said: "You are not an adult", giggled and ran off. Theo laughed. There were few moments that kids approached Peter and joked with him. Theo seemed to provide some of the social ease that Peter was missing to communicate with others. Games or little exercises that stressed students' interconnectedness were less observable. This absence spoke to the mentality of stressing individual and personalised activities. However, for Peter social connection did not come naturally and Theo's ability to interact with classmates more easily stood in stark contrast with Peter's isolation. While Bricklane School stressed a strong objective to foster students' social and emotional skills, a feeling of belonging in the classroom and school as a "family" of students and teachers – in Peter's case, efforts to achieve a sense of belonging – did not stand out. Nonetheless, social and emotional well-being were embedded in everyday conversations, interactions, specific times in their weekly schedule to organise a social activity.

Discussion and concluding remarks

This study aimed to investigate how the global project of inclusive schooling affected one particular school in Austria, and what affordances and challenges came with the approach that this school chose. Many schools across the globe have ventured out in different ways to take on international policy goals set by the UNCRPD or the SDGs (Engelbrecht *et al.*, 2016). In these examples, the interplay between structures, policies and traditions of schooling on the ground as well as the new impetus of the policy scape of inclusion (Carney, 2009) cause friction. The path of individual schools, then, shows us a window into the possibilities and limitations that school leadership and educators have to develop different practices around diversity and student needs. We offered the case of Bricklane to show how schools may use the conditions on the ground for setting new standards in inclusive education, and to critically discuss what these practices may mean in view of school development and classroom pedagogies (Ainscow *et al.*, 2006; 2012; Florian and Beaton, 2018; Kinsella, 2020; Gale *et al.*, 2017). We showcased that Bricklane's innovation marked "doing difference differently" in two fundamental ways. On the one hand, it meant a set of initiatives, actions and beliefs at the organisational and pedagogical level through which Bricklane established itself as an alternative model to mainstream schooling. This came through in its "whole-school approach" (Kinsella, 2020) that was crucially intertwined with "professional development for teachers focusing on student-centered pedagogies" (McLeskey and Waldron, 2015, p. 72). Nobody was allowed to be a fully-employed teacher without dual certification as both teacher and trained pedagogue in Bricklane's framework. Whereas the general trend in Austrian teacher education has been to shorten the lengths of the teaching degree, Bricklane demanded more education instead. Its teaching staff therefore had a precise conception of their own pedagogical tools and of the ideas which [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2009, p. 22] has identified as crucial in building inclusive schools. Furthermore, its principal had invested her personal skills to set up Bricklane as a model school which speaks to another important aspect of realising change that Óskarsdóttir *et al.* (2020) describe: "School leaders who feel a sense of ownership of

reform" are able to move their members of staff in the direction of transformation (p. 529). Responding to changes, affording greater school autonomy to principals in Austria, Ms Straus took an active part in reforming her school. She demonstrated leadership qualities that principals in other contexts may find inspiring to replicate while her attitude also remained strategic and at times limited the inclusive nature of her school concept. She fostered a pedagogical approach that stressed inclusion in the way it organised the school day, the classroom setting, the learning environment, teaching materials and student–teacher relationships.

The study also showed how leadership can inspire educators to transgress traditional forms of teaching and learning. Bricklane's teachers also illustrated many inclusive efforts. They designed meaningful content and working sessions that would be inclusive of everyone and respect individuality as a common feature, and their avoidance of labelling when creating learning environments. This school provided insights into how students' confidence, creativity and curiosity could be nurtured, while children of different ages and different abilities were constantly involved in creating their "family", i.e. their learning community. In this study, teachers were willing not only to invest in their own training to expand their pedagogical repertoire, but also to become active participants in an educational vision, set by the principal and confidently supported by her staff.

On the other hand, Bricklane contributed to the reproduction of hierarchised difference that differed from the way this usually happens in mainstream schools. Firstly, Bricklane's initiatives seemed to work through a very deliberate orchestration of the admissions process, which limited students whose socio-economic conditions were weaker to strike a balance between different income groups – a factor which often coincides with educational achievement. In essence, Bricklane handpicked its student population to realise a pedagogical mission that works for the school. Although this proportional approach created a spectrum of diversity in the classroom, it filtered neighbourhood diversity and permitted affluent families outside the school district to enrol. Regulating school admissions policy in this way did not agree with teachers' general views on inclusive classrooms. Hence, local efforts to secure funding via strategic partnerships with stakeholders (including affluent families) and negotiating school admission policy seemed to be prerequisites of innovative school development and of the implementation of inclusive pedagogies. This, as is often the case in countries like the USA where tax payers fund the quality of the district schools, is in contradiction with inclusive school policy development, which attempts to admit all students in the neighbourhood (Booth and Ainscow, 2002, pp. 39–40).

Secondly, Bricklane created new pedagogical practices (co-teaching, personal learning projects) that came with new pedagogical norms (learner autonomy, sociability and belonging, shared teaching). Although these new forms have potentially accommodated a greater scope of diversity than in mainstream schools, they have also recycled conventional practices with regards to students with SEN. Bricklane presented with a discrepancy between general and domain-specific approaches to student diversities in classroom contexts. While the TA was of necessary support to Peter, the way in which assistance was enacted marked Peter as "other". This was evident in how teachers described Peter as having unsettling learning abilities, a lesser ability to work autonomously and in their limited expectations of his personal learning goals. This level of differentiation was in contrast with Bricklane's general pedagogical vision of diversity. In particular, Theo (TA) and Peter's (child with SEN) relationship shows that there is less of an innovative approach and instead seemed to remain in line with the typical routines of special pedagogical attention for the "special" child (Armstrong, 2016; Mackenzie, 2011).

Bringing together the two ways Bricklane was "doing difference differently", the findings point to a fundamental paradox: There were selective organisational efforts alongside inclusive pedagogical efforts and there was tension between a general approach to inclusion *vis-à-vis* a specific approach to SEN-related interventions in the classroom. These findings carry implications for educational policy and practice. As many children could benefit from the type of attention and care, solidarity and support provided in schools like Bricklane, we highlight the need for classroom practices and school policies that align with and jointly reflect the principles of inclusion. Those who envision and implement school development, then, would need to pay greater attention to creating equal chances for accessing school available to all neighbourhood children, regardless of sociodemographics and parental resources. We also consider teacher education crucial. The findings alert for a continued critical examination of how difference and inequality continue to be made in specific school contexts. School teams could then initiate collaborative reflections on their organisational and pedagogical practice, and what those mean for inclusion in their own contexts and for their own students.

Although this study has provided a thick exploration of a particular context by using multiple data sources and a multilayered (school organisation and teaching practice) analysis, it also has some limitations. The rich data presented here were gathered from a small amount of participants, situated in a particular context and time, and therefore our findings cannot be generalised. Further research applying comparative case studies and quantitative methods could compliment these findings by determining the effects of the showcased practices on student outcomes. Yet, our findings offer rich insights into how a particular institution worked with favourable conditions on the ground, and may consequently generate insights for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers that find themselves exposed to similar liberties, enabling them to inspire change and transform attitudes and pedagogies of teaching diverse students.

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