Inclusive Education and the Progressive Inclusionists

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Summary

It is 25 years since the Salamanca Statement became piviotal in encouraging nations to move towards inclusive education. Much progress has been made, yet the question must be asked if inclusive education has now plateaued. Inclusive education can be comparted to a bycicle where momentum powers it forward and it must continually move in order to stay upright. With this movement also needs to come a clear direction of travel. Movement for the sake of movement will not bode well. If full inclusion is to succeed as a universal actuality, not just an admirable goal, then it must be clear how to push the majority of countries forward thus achieving full inclusion for most rather than a few. In many countries the reality of the principles of inclusive education are not reflected in every day schooling. There have been many successes in inclusive education over many years in many countries and these should be celebrated. It is argued in this article that full inclusion is considered an over-reach of inclusivists with most countries not achieving full inclusion, however others argue that it is still attainable. From this point where can the inclusion movement go? Has it, in effect, reached the end of of its journey such as a bike with no rider – eventually the bike will fall over.

Keywords
inclusive education, special education, special schools, educational psychology, school psychology, school inclusion, segregation, full inclusion, special educational needs, bycycle theory

Introduction

For decades now scholars have been arguing the merits of inclusive education. In the mid 1990s almost half of the world's nations signed up to what was described as 'the most significant document that has ever appeared in the field of special education' (Ainscow & César, 2006, p. 231) – the Salamanca Statement. This Statement required governments to put inclusive education at the forefront of all educational policies and reform. Despite this commitment and the myriad of scholarly work that has been published in this area since, nations are still grappling with inclusive education, from the seemingly straightforward task of defining what it actually is, to the more complex challenge of its implementation (Schwab, Sharma & Loreman, 2018). This paper sets out to consider the current position of inclusive education from an international perspective, and act as a critique as to the success or otherwise of this now decades old ideal. This discussion is timely as the number of students enrolling within their local schools from backgrounds considered to be diverse is increasing across schools globally (Schwab, Sharma & Loreman, 2018).

Defining inclusive education: an elusive proposition

Inclusive education grew out of the special education arena and was originally concerned with the education of students with a disability, however it is now understood to encompass the delivery of education to *all* students (Boyle & Sharma, 2015). However, researchers such as Kauffman, Anastasiou, Badar and Hallenbeck (In press) suggest that attempting to have a fully inclusive education system is unatainable and unrealistic. Looking at it through this broad lens, it is easy to understand why Slee (2011) describes inclusive education as a philosophy of education that is bound within an egalitarian paradigm, and this notion is something that will be explored later. In its simplest form, inclusive education is about providing the most optimum learning opportunity to all children, irresepctive of the context

in which this is provided. Nevertheless, defining such a seemingly simple concept as providing the the best learning environment for children has proven to be a bigger hurdle than any scholar, educationalist or policy maker has been able to jump; to date there is no globally accepted definition of inclusive education. Unsurprisingly this throws up some challenges when working with the construct itself, especially when attempting to critique its success.

Measuring the Success of Inclusive Education

Measuring the success (or not) of inclusive education is a notion that is difficult to quantify, principally when considering that in order to measure something one must first understand exactly what it is that is to be measured. The construct of inclusive education, without any clear definition or set of standard against which to measure (Anderson & Boyle, 2015), is therefore problematic. Accordingly, it can be argued that many studies which purport to study different aspects of inclusive education from different perspectives, such as teacher attitudes (Boyle, Topping, & Jindal-Snape, 2013; Boyle, Topping, Jindal-Snape, & Norwich, 2012; Hoskin, Boyle, & Anderson, 2015) or teacher efficacy (Klassen, Tze, Betts, & Gordon, 2011; Park, Dimitrov, Das, & Gichuru, 2016), while valid within their own confines, cannot be accurately compared. This presents an inherent problem when questioning the efficacy of inclusive education itself, and for any attempts to measure it. Schwab, Sharma and Loreman (2018) identify a number of ways that studies have worked to measure the success of inclusive education over the past decades. These include methods such as measuring the numbers of students considered as having additional education needs accessing mainstream classrooms, identifying the academic outcomes for these students, identifying the social outcomes for these students, and/or investigating the well-being of the school. Teachers have also been the focus of many studies in this field. It is interesting to note here the dearth of research into inclusive education that gives voice to the students it encompasses (Schwab,

Sharma & Loreman, 2018). Why this is the case is somewhat difficult to explain, however it does suggest that there are challenges involved in doing this type of research, again highlighting the complexity of inclusive education. Studies conducted to date tend to be quite small scale and locality specific. For example, Feller (2013) interviewed 19 students about their learning across three special schools and a secure unit in England, but with a very small sample and a lack of comparison to equivalent students in mainstream schooling, the generalisability it restricted. A much more ambitious study or studies which encompass comparitable views of children with similar difficulties in different settings would seem somewhat apposite, so as to provide a clearer understanding of the experiences of children and young people themselves.

Another ambiguity of inclusive education that needs to be explored here is the seemingly accepted notion that inclusive education is now a continuum, along which systems and schools can sit at opposite ends but still purport to be operating under the philosophy of inclusive education (see Slee, 2018, for a discussion on this). At one end sits the concept of 'full inclusion', where all students are provided with the appropriate supports to participate and achieve within the same classroom. At the other end of the continuum sits the idea that there will always be a small percentage of students with needs that cannot be met within the mainstream classroom (e.g. due to issues such as severe learning or behavioural difficulties) and these students should be catered for within a special education setting (Boyle, Anderson, Page & Mavropoulou, In Press). Systems that espouse inclusive education as their guiding principle for the education of all students sit at various points along this continuum. Unless this is made evident at the beginning of any attempt to understand the success (or not) of inclusive education, deduced results are going to be questionable at best. This presents another challenge for researchers attempting to critique inclusive education.

Loreman (2014) attempted to overcome these challenges in his proposal to measure inclusive education through the lens of its outcomes, rather than trying to measure the construct itself. He identified the areas of student participation, student achievement and post-school outcomes as being valid measures of the success (or not) of inclusive education. This process has since been used to look at the effectiveness of inclusive practices in Canada (Loreman, 2014) and Australia (Anderson & Boyle, 2015). As with all research methods developed to date however, this process does not come without its limitations (see Loreman, 2014). While it must be conceded here that this approach does not provide a one-size-fits-all method to measure inclusive education's success, it does provide for some interesting exploration of whether or not the educational reforms that countries have implemented under the banner of inclusive education in recent decades have actually had positive post-school outcomes for all students. Perhaps this is some work that needs to be done on a global scale.

With all of these challenges in mind we will not attempt to provide a nation-by-nation critique of inclusive education, but rather look at the construct as a global phenomenon - where it started, what it has achieved, where it sits currently and what lies ahead.

Full inclusion: An attainable ideal or just a Utopian dream?

The past quarter of a century has seen, in many countries, a campaign to have full inclusion as the absolute model of provision of education for students with additional support needs. Yet full inclusion has proven to be somewhat of a utopian dream. Questions around why full inclusion has not really taken hold, properly or effectively, are clearly important. Even in the few nations who are held up as 'shining lights' by advocates of full inclusion, there are issues. The Italian approach to inclusive education has been long regarded as a good example

of full inclusion, however it is not without its critics (e.g. Lauchlan & Fadda, 2012; Anastasiou, Kauffman & Di Nuovo, 2015; Anastasiou & Keller, 2017) as it is purported that many teachers may not be satisfied with the system, and some students with additional support needs may not attend school at all. This, of course, suggests that inclusive education in Italy may not be as comprehensive as it is sometimes regarded. Despite legal provisions being in place that should provide robust pillars that enshrine inclusive practice as the *de jure* standard (D'Alessio, 2011), things are not working as perhaps intended. In the Basque Country, an autonomous region of Northern Spain, the educational policy is that of supporting the inclusive education process where students with special educational needs are educated in their local community (Gaintza, Darretxe & Boyle, In Press). While this focus seems to be supported by all involved in the education system in this region, in the rest of Spain it does not seem to be the case. This brings to light the paradox that just because something is written into education policy or even enshrined in law, it does not guarantee successful enactment (Dixon & Verenikina, 2007). Slee (2018) laments that while many countries have at the forefront of their educational policy a 'commitment to the principles and practice of inclusive education' (p. 20), this is certainly not reflected in the reality of everyday schooling operations. He describes the discourse on inclusive education at the system level as now being 'an empty language' (p. 20).

Many other countries where there was a will in the beginning to work towards full inclusion have seen this enthusiasm plateau (e.g. USA, New Zealand), and indeed others, such as the UK and Australia, are even going backwards. In these nations, segregated units and schools offering specialist provisions are on the increase, with greater numbers of students being enrolled in them (Norwich & Black, 2015; Boyle & Anderson, 2014; Anderson & Boyle, 2015; Boyle, Anderson & Swayn, 2015). To add to this, students with disabilities who also

have other disadvantages, such as those from low socio-economic or ethnic minority backgrounds, make up a higher proportion of those who are being placed into these segregated settings (Cooc & Kiru, 2018).

The question must be asked - is the pursuit of full inclusion realistic, or indeed, is it really the utopia of inclusive education? An interesting perspective in this debate comes from parents themselves. Parents, as advocates, can be regarded as good barometers of what is required for the successful education of their children. The continuing support of many parents for some form of separate specialist provision (Slee, 2018) clearly indicates that there is a need and thus a desire for this type of categorical separation from mainstream schooling. In fact, in one educational jurisdiction in Australia, data collected (up until 2014) from parents of students who attended a separate specialist school were the most satisfied group of parents in that State, while the parents of students identified as having additional learning needs who attended their local mainstream school, were the least satisfied (Queensland Government, 2014). The gap was significant (Anderson & Boyle, 2015), and it is interesting to note that after a number of consecutive years of the disparate results, this information was removed from the Department of Education Annual Reporting document in 2015 and has not appeared in any of their subsequent reports. Malaquias (2017) argues that the support parents have for segregated settings is as a result of a failure on the part of systems and professionals to properly guide parents in their decision making. Perhaps this is because education currently functions under a neo-liberal paradigm where choice is espoused as being of benefit, whether or not it actually is (Niesche & Keddie, 2016). Governments actively push for choice in schooling options, despite the nations they govern having adopted the philosophy of inclusive education. Policy makers argue that parents and students should have choice in schooling options, and while enrolments are continuing to remain stable, or even increase, these

different options for schooling will persist. With some parent bodies and many policy makers advocating for separate specialist provisions for students with additional support needs, an obvious question arises – where is the push for full inclusion coming from?

The main push for full inclusion seems to be coming from the academic sphere of influence. Theorists such as Roger Slee (e.g. Slee, 2011, 2012, 2018) in Australia or Federico Waitoller (e.g. Waitoller, Kozleski & Gonzalez, 2016; Waitoller, In press) in the US extol the necessity of the education systems moving to full inclusion. However, academics such as Norwich in the UK (Norwich, 2008, 2012) and Kauffman in the US (Kauffman & Badar, 2014; Kauffman, Ward & Badar, 2016, Kauffman, Anastasiou, Badar & Hallenbeck, Forthcoming) suggest that it is possible that we have to consider inclusive education in a much more pragmatic way. They raise concerns about issues including the theoretical challenges (such as the lack of a shared understanding of what inclusive education is, and the provocative questions of value and difference), and the practical challenges (such as meeting individual needs, resourcing and the identification of potential barriers), within the current educational climate. From this perspective, it is difficult to argue that the provision of *all* supports required to deliver a quality education to *all* students in their local mainstream school is indeed possible. Students with significant and complex educational needs make up a small percentage of students and it is for these students that some, such as Norwich and Kauffman, respectively, argue there needs to remain the provision of separate education. Suggesting that every student's educational needs can be met in the local mainstream school does now seem unrealistic, and evidence from around the world does seem to suggest that this is so (e.g. Kauffman & Bader, 2014); Elliot, In Press). However, it would be disingenuous to deny that progress has been made. The past forty years has seen the movement of many students from segregated into mainstream schooling, and some groups of students who may not have had the opportunity to attend school at all now do. There have been impressive improvements in

attitudes to inclusive education from in-service (Boyle, Topping & Jindal-Snape, 2012; Boyle, Topping, Jindal-Snape & Norwich, 2012; Sharma, Aiello, Pace, Round & Subban, 2018) and pre-service teachers (Hoskin et al., 2015; Kraska & Boyle, 2014). As a consequence, what is acceptable under the inclusive education or special education needs banners has changed. The notion of separating students who have mild to moderate learning or behavioural difficulties into separate education provisions, or excluding students from attending school at all, is no longer readily regarded as being acceptable practice. This is clearly progress. Despite this, countries such as Australia, UK, Germany and the USA (amongst others) are not really any closer to full inclusion than they were ten years ago. Closing separate specialist provisions in these countries is not part of their educational reform agendas, and as discussed earlier, in some of these countries, separate specialist facilities continue to be built (Slee, 2018; Anderson & Boyle, 2015).

While we acknowledge that the issues raised in the previous section are legitimate points of concern, there is an important caveat to this argument against full inclusion that must be noted here. In simple terms, the implementation of inclusive education has been placed at the feet of schools (Wrigley, Thomson & Lingard, 2012). Schools are required to enroll all students who enter through their front gate and then must provide for them. Schools working to support all students face issues such as a dearth of appropaite resources and /or facialities that, when available, are poorly or inequitably disseminated, deficit models of funding that focus on difference and weakness, and the compulsory labelling and categorisation of students to enable them to eligible for what is classified as 'additional support'. These issues situate education as one of the last bastions where the separation and categorisation of people is still regarded as accepted practice, despite the negative consequences of doing so (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007; Boyle, 2014). Can this be considered a fair approach? If not, is it

fair to attest that full inclusion is unachievable? Current educational systems and structures are imbued with obstructions that make the provision of inclusive education a challenge. Frankly speaking, they are exclusive. If one was feeling pessimistic it could be possible to deduce that inclusive education, particularly the notion of full inclusion, was always set to fail, and Slee (2018) outlines why.

> 'the structures and cultures of schooling reinforce privilege and exacerbate disadvantage according to the taut and taught, boundaries of the neo-liberal imagination. Accordingly, there is no shortage of data demonstrating academic underachievement and diminished educational experiences according to students' class, gender, race, ethnicity, or perceived ability or disability' (p. 31).

The connection that Slee makes between neo-liberalism and inclusive education is a very pertinent one. Neo-liberalism, and its influence on recent educational reform, must take some of the blame for the obstacles presented to full inclusion. Its ideals of marketisation and choice, standardisation, and accountability have all worked to undermine the premise of inclusive education (Anderson & Boyle, In Press). Students with additional educational needs cost more, often achieve lower results and do not fit within the standards that systems place upon them (Ainscow, 2010). They also make up a large percentage of students who experience behavioural difficulties at school (Armstrong, 2018). For these reasons many schools resist taking on students with additional educational needs, particularly when those needs are more complex. In their defense, schools are measured and subsequently judged by their performance against set standards (Muller, 2018) that do not consider students as individuals with individual educational requirements. The external pressures systems place on schools to 'perform' can prevent them from focussing on effective inclusion practices. It may be then that it is not schools that need to change the way they do things, but systems.

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The status quo

Some scholars argue that what is happening currently under the guise of inclusive education is about right, and we have discussed some of these ideas in the previous section. They question the need for full-inclusion, and this unfettered pursuit of it by some has at times been referred to in the literature as the 'inclusive education movement' (e.g. Yadav, Das, Sharma & Ashwini, 2015), a term which has particular negative connotations, much like that of a protest movement. Kauffman et al. (2016) fairly points out that "change itself is not synonymous with improvement." (p. 154), and argues that it is the effective education of children and young people with a disability that should be the focus of the debate, rather than placement. It is difficult to disagree with the second part of this point, as a focus on 'placement' is an outdated rheotric. However the debate about inclusive education is broader that just disability, and while we do not deny that the provison of an education to students with a disability is of paramount importance, it is not the only consideration. The fundamental aspect of inclusive education should, indeed, be the education of all children and young people; a point with which advocates of full inclusion agree. However, it has been suggested by some (see Hornby, 2014, Kauffman et al., 2014, 2016) that there is an unattainability linked to the notion of full inclusion and that by pursuing this path some children and/or young people may in fact be denied social justice. Kauffman et al. (2016) makes that emotive claim that in the full inclusion debate, students and teachers involved in the special education sector are 'sacrificed for the sake of philosophical purity' (p. 173). It is arguments such as this that maintain the status quo.

Has full inclusion become an evangelical pursuit?

It is clear from the discussion presented here that globally, models of education delivery are a long way from what could be described as being fully inclusive, even in those few countries who attest to be. Despite this, the fervour to pursue full inclusion is, by some, as strong two decades into this century as it was when the construct first entered educational discourse almost forty years ago. To understand this, it is worth taking a step back to the beginning. Inclusive education started out in the 1980s as a movement to challenge the paradigm of the time and improve the education of children who had various types of special needs. It was framed as a civil right - children and young people with a disability had a right to access education in an equitable manner equal to that of their non-disabled peers (Boroson, 2017). Sitting behind this move were various pieces of legislation in various countries, and a decade after this began, inclusive education was underpinned by the influential international agreement *the Salamanca Statement*, to which many countries became signatories. Advocates of inclusive education who pursued the cause have changed the educational story for many students around the globe. Children and young people who were once considered too different to be educated within their local classrooms, now are. From its very beginnings inclusive education has been grounded in social justice. Global organisations such as the OECD, UNESCO and UNICEF have also weighed into the debate, arguing that inclusive practices are beneficial to everyone, from an economic as well as a social perspective (OECD, 2017; UNESCO, 2015; UNICEF, 2014; UNICEF, 2013). Even advocates of special education, such as Norwich (2013), acknowledge the roots of inclusive education when he described it as "…a contemporary mix of the values of equal opportunity, social respect, and solidarity" (p. 154). It is this belief in social justice that keeps proponents of full inclusion fighting the fight, in what some may describe as an evangelic pursuit.

Whether or not the responsibility for issues of social justice should be placed at the feet of systems and schools is a question that has been explored recently by scholars such as Apple (2015) and Bregman (2017). Despite this, advocates of full inclusion strongly argue that the practices and patterns of acceptance, understanding and valuing of difference need to happen within schools to negate the lifelong segregation or discrimination that many of those from marginalised or minority groups experience. Nevertheless, after decades of pro-inclusion rhetoric and the policy gains which have been made, the reality of what is happening in schools is still a long way from what could be described as full inclusion. Perhaps the perennial drive towards full inclusion has reached its natural end. Practitioners, academics, parents, and policy makers may now have reached a situation where this notion of a single belief system that full inclusion is the only way forward may not be considered to be the soundest position. Perhaps full inclusion should now be considered an over-reach of inclusivists.

The Bicycle Theory

Where the drive towards full inclusion will end up is debatable, as one cannot be reliably expected to foresee future policy or attitudinal directions. What we do know, and is inescapable, is that we are a long way from reaching that end goal. Achievements since the 1970s and 1980s are certainly laudable, as inclusion has brought more students into the system, and moved from just the placing of students in the classroom – integration, to many more students successfully completing their schooling alongside their peers - inclusive education. In spite of this, it is arguable that there has been much, if any, real progress made over the past decade. Slee (2018), a staunch activist, describes the work of the inclusion movement to reduce exclusionary educational practices in this way – 'it seems that our interventions to dismantle it or minmise its effects at best seem to have minimal impact and,

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at worst, strengthen and sustain it' (p. 16). It is a legitimate and perfectly valid question to now query where else the 'inclusive education movement' can go. Perhaps this term is no longer accurate, as using the word 'movement' implies some sort of global collective with the capacity to affect some type of change. This 'movement' seems to have come and gone, and the fervour to achieve full inclusion is no longer there for those who currently hold the power to make it happen – the policy makers. It is here that the notion of the Bicycle Theory comes into play. The term was coined by Walter Hallstein (Eichengreen, 2016), who was the first commissioner of the original body now known as the European Union (EU). Bicycle theory was used by Hallstein to explain the principle that various attempts at 'progress', what ever that 'progress' may be, must occur to ensure that the end goals that have been set can be achieved. If 'progress' halts, everything falls over; just as a bicycle needs to keep moving, even slowly, to make sure it does not become unstable and fall. American linguist Noam Chomsky (2016) used this analogy when asked to explain his attitude to life, 'As long as you keep riding, you don't fall'.

This analogy can be applied to inclusive education. As noted previously in this paper, the inclusive education movement has made some big gains for large groups of children and young people since the late 1970s. The bicycle started its journey and was travelling swiftly and smoothly. The 1990s and 2000s saw continued progress, including clear examples of attitudinal change (e.g. Boyle et al., 2012; Boyle et al., 2014; Slee, 2018; Waitoler, forthcoming), and the bicycle kept pedalling. However, the last decade has seen a dramatic slowing down of progress, and in some cases, a reversion to more exclusionary practices. It seems as though the inclusive education drive may have plateaued. The bicycle has slowed dramatically and is now starting to wobble. So questions need to be asked. Is it simply that many of the countries who were signatories to the Salamanca Statement cannot achieve their

original goal of full inclusion? Has it turned out to be more difficult than first perceived? It does appear that the drive towards full inclusion has lost its energy and momentum, and is perhaps considered by policy makers and others as being unrealistic. Currently in England (Norwich & Black, 2015) and Australia (Boyle & Anderson, 2015) special schools are on the increase, as are the numbers of students who are attending this type of provision. One of the messages this sends is that there is a demand for segregated educational settings; whether this is palatable by inclusivists or not, it seems an inescapable truth. It may now be the case that full inclusion, with the direction of current educational reform agendas, will never be achieved. Persevering with the possibility that full inclusion, on its current trajectory, can be achieved seems to be in keeping with the hopelessness of the green light at the end of the pier which signalled unattainable and forlorn hope for Fitzgerald's ephemerally gregarious yet tragic character *Gatsby*. The bicycle has fallen over.

At a crossroads: Where to from here?

Everything is not lost. If we choose to we can pick our bicycle up, dust ourselves off, and look for another path to take, one with a different trajectory to reinvigorate the inclusive education debate. There are those who will argue that this is a waste of time, as the evidence they have presented does not show inclusive education as a beneficial pursuit (for example, see Hornby, 2014). However there are others who argue differently (Hehir, 2016) and still hold the drive to fight for inclusive education.

There is no doubt that in the current educational climate inclusive education is faced with many challenges, and some of these have been discussed here. When considered as it currently is in many countries, as a construct to be enacted by schools under the guise of inclusive education policy, it is not difficult to see why inclusive education is considered

unattainable. Meeting the educational needs of all students within schools that have not changed sufficiently enough to do this is not going to happen, not for everyone anyway. This was the not the intent of the early inclusive education movement. The Salamanca Statement called for 'major reform of the ordinary school' (UNESCO, 1994, p. iv) and it is this that has not ensued.

Scrutinising systems through the lens of what constitutes a 'good education' (see Anderson & Boyle, in press, for a discussion on this) for all students and how best to deliver this, would benefit every child and young person enrolled in a school. This will require scholars and educationalists to think outside the box of what is currently delivered as education, and challenge the status quo. Challenging and meaningful research interrogating systemic barriers to inclusive education (such as funding models, currriuclum, and resourcing) must happen to better understand why progress towards full inclusion has halted. Further more, understanding of inclusive education as a construct, and the role it has to play in the development of a more socially just society, must also be explored and understood. It will be this new kind of thinking, described by Bregman (2017) as that which goes beyond what is considered possible at the moment, that will bring about long term sustainable change. Would it not be nice to think that in 100 years time our bicycle has taken a new path, gained momentum, and completed the journey to a place where full inclusion is the norm? Perhaps this journey will sit in discussions at another point in time, where scholars will reflect on the success story of inclusive education.

Conclusion

Debates around inclusive education - what it looks like, should look like, and could look like - show very little sign of abating. However, it can conceivably be argued that the zenith of the

current approach may have passed and inclusive education is at risk of just becoming another utopian ideal that got away. To disrupt this, the trajectory of debate needs to shift and we must begin to question the very structures and systems that govern the work done in our schools. History dictates that any form of revolution takes a massive groundswell of opinion to force change. But that groundswell must start somewhere. There are voices arguing for the need to change the direction of the debate around inclusive education – and education as a whole. While they may currently be in the minority, and their ideas considered by many as being too 'out there', unrealistic, or unachievable, they are working to redefine inclusive education. This is something to cling to. As Bregman (2017) reminds us:

> 'If we want to change the world we need to be unrealistic, unreasonable, and impossible. Remember: those who called for the abolition of slavery, for suffrage for women, and for same-sex marriage were also once branded as lunatics. Until history proved them right' (p. 264).

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