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Critically considering the ‘inclusive curriculum’ in higher education

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critical interrogation of the recent drive towards the ‘inclusive curriculum’ in higher education (HE). Our arguments are grounded in the findings of a systematic scoping review that sought to understand how researchers have, to date, understood, conceptualised and theorised the inclusive curriculum in HE. The findings indicate that many researchers adopted largely ‘technicist’ understandings of inclusion as learning effectiveness and adapting current provision, seemingly prioritising a neo-liberal outcomes-driven approach to education. Given that universities worldwide are currently championing the use of certain strategies to facilitate an inclusive curriculum, it is questionable on what grounds these strategies are being promoted and what they might be ‘doing’ within educational spaces. We conclude that the importance of disciplinary context for understanding inclusion is currently under-appreciated, and that conceptualisations of inclusion and the inclusive curriculum mirror broader educational debates as to the very aims and purposes of education.

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A drive for inclusion in higher education

Higher education (HE) has historically been associated with ‘exclusivity’ rather than ‘inclusivity’. In the UK context, it has been noted that groups of students who might be considered non-traditional such as women, ethnic minorities, working-class, disabled, and mature students have over the past century been excluded from HE at the point of access, and by the structures and cultures that permeate within universities (Leathwood and Read 2009; Reay, David, and Ball 2005). This has led critics to identify universities as an instrument of social inequality and reproduction. Yet the face of HE has shifted over the past three decades, underpinned by neo-liberal reform that has ‘massified’ and globalised the system and has embedded the principles of competition and choice into the sphere (Naidoo and Williams 2015; Olssen and Peters 2005). This has created—at least to a certain extent—more diverse campuses than in the early to mid-20th century, as driven by widening participation agendas and internationalisation (e.g. Kettley 2007; Knight 2013). University leaders are, in turn, under increased pressure to create welcoming educational environments so that all students feel valued, have a ‘good’ experience, and receive ‘value for money’ in an increasingly competitive HE marketplace (Tomlinson 2018).

In parallel, the discourse of inclusion has become increasingly embedded in educational policy in many countries over the past thirty years following landmark international agreements concerning human rights, such as the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994), UN Sustainable Development Goals (2015), and UNESCO Education 2030 Framework for Action (2015). Traditionally, the term ‘inclusion’ has been quite strongly associated with the realm of compulsory schooling and particularly students with disabilities; yet there is a broader sense in which the term is increasingly being used, to refer to equity and social justice for all groups (Ainscow 2020). HE represents a distinctive space where the inclusive agenda is becoming more influential; higher education institutions (HEIs) now often have sections of their websites dedicated to outlining their policies and strategies for equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) (e.g. UCL 2021; University of Toronto 2019; University of Uppsala 2021). Such policies might be understood as demonstrating HEIs’ moral and ethical commitment to social justice, in response to the long-held historical association between HE, elitism and intellectual exclusivity (i.e. white, male, upper/middle-classness). Recent political and social movements have also gained increased traction within universities such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, with campaigns and events such as Black History Month and LGBTQ+ History Month commonplace on many campuses (Fazackerley 2018; Pittham 2020). This indicates that some HEIs are keen to show that they are taking a stance in relation to equality issues. However, it must be noted that EDI is often a legal requirement that universities must fulfil so that they do not receive official sanctions (e.g. Equality Act 2010 in the UK; Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986 in Australia), and some have questioned the strength of HEIs’ moral commitment versus legal commitment to EDI (Ahmed 2012).

This drive for inclusion has further translated into a focus on educational practice, with a greater emphasis being placed at sector level on HE educators adopting an inclusive approach to enhance their pedagogy (e.g. AdvanceHE 2020). In England, this is perhaps unsurprising given that student satisfaction has become an important indicator by which the ‘quality’ of HEIs are judged, as evidenced by the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in 2016/17—which has subsequently drawn criticism from a number of university leaders and academics (Gourlay and Stevenson 2017), and is currently under government review (Office for Students (OfS) 2021).

In the field of HE research, there exists a body of scholarship that takes a critical perspective and explores how teaching and learning have been both conceptualised and realised in the context of the globalised, neo-liberal university—and highlights how pedagogical approaches can reinforce or challenge social inequalities (e.g. Burke 2015; McArthur 2010). However, research that explores how the specific discourse of *inclusion* has been taken up in the HE sector and what it ‘does’ is still in its relative infancy (for exceptions, see e.g. Stentiford and Koutsouris 2021; Koutsouris, Stentiford, and Norwich 2022). This paper seeks to extend this work by focusing on an aspect of the inclusive agenda that is ‘playing out’ quite visibly in HE—the drive for the ‘inclusive curriculum’.

The inclusive curriculum is often recommended by academic managers and developers as something that HE educators should be aiming to achieve in their practice (e.g. Durham University 2020; University of St Andrews 2021). And yet, when we sought to investigate further the concept of the inclusive curriculum in the research literature, we found little consensus as to what it might be or its theoretical underpinnings. This raises questions as to why universities might currently be championing certain curricular approaches in the

name of ‘inclusivity’, and on what ‘evidence’ such recommendations might be based. This prompted us to conduct a systematic scoping review of the research literature to critically unpack how researchers have understood and theorised the inclusive curriculum in HE. In the sections that follow, we detail the aims of this paper and our review methodology, but first it is important to situate this review within wider scholarship which explores the nature and role of the curriculum in education.

What is the curriculum?

The word ‘curriculum’ is ubiquitous in the realm of compulsory education, as used by practitioners, policymakers and researchers in the everyday and its definition often appears taken for granted. A common sense understanding might be that the word refers to the syllabus or content of what is taught by educators in educational establishments. Yet there is a lack of consensus even amongst researchers specialising in the curriculum as to what it might be (see Young 2014). Some understand the curriculum as incorporating not only the knowledge it is hoped that students will acquire, but knowledge of pedagogy and how curricular content is to be imparted. This includes the activities and tasks devised by teachers—and might also include arrangements for assessment, although others see assessment as a separate concern (Scott 2001). Whilst it is clear that matters of the curriculum and pedagogy are closely intertwined and might be considered mutually supportive, some have argued that it can be useful to retain an analytic distinction between curriculum/pedagogy for greater precision and conceptual clarity (e.g. Young 2014).

There is, however, broad agreement that any understanding of the curriculum is bound up with ideas about knowledge, and curriculum scholars have devoted considerable attention over the past half century to debating philosophical and epistemological questions as to the nature of knowledge, truth, and what counts as legitimate and/or ‘high-status’ knowledge (e.g. Young 1971, 2008; Pinar 1978; Apple 1979; Wheelahan 2010; Biesta 2014). These questions connect in turn with wider questions as to the very purpose of education and school aims (Biesta 2010; Reiss and White 2013). Such debates usually involve consideration of whether the curriculum should be underpinned by social democratic and liberal aims and what form this knowledge might take, or whether knowledge should in some way be grounded in competency-based skills that might equip students for their future lives and work—in line with a perceived shift towards neo-liberal educational policy (see e.g. Ball 2016). There are various strands of thinking around this including much disagreement in views, with scholars working from a variety of philosophical and theoretical positions.

Theorising inclusion and the inclusive curriculum in HE

When considering the inclusive curriculum and what it might be that constitutes *inclusion*, a common understanding might be that an inclusive curriculum is one that recognises and accommodates *all* students. This stance appreciates that students have different experiences and requirements (e.g. from lower socio-economic backgrounds, disabled students, those speaking English as an additional language) and might have specific needs or challenges to overcome. People have given different responses to this matter. For some, difference should not be foregrounded as it is regarded as too individualistic, focused on deficits, and neglects that diversity requires a social response (Ainscow 2020; Florian and Spratt 2013). According

to this perspective, to recognise difference at the curricular level necessitates the utilisation of different teaching content, approaches and materials that can result in stigmatisation and marginalisation. This has often led to a demand for approaches that can accommodate all learners, such as Universal Design (UD) (Meyer, Rose, and Gordon 2014). Others, however, argue that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to the curriculum can be charged with failing to recognise and respond to difference, with those who might require additional support (e.g. students with dyslexia) potentially neglected and restricted in terms of participation (Cigman 2007). This has often been discussed as the 'dilemma of difference' (Norwich 2007).

The above considers theoretical tensions in relation to curricular design in terms of provision, relating to the 'tools' by which knowledge is made accessible to different groups. Yet any conceptualisation of an inclusive curriculum has important philosophical, social and political dimensions which rest on fundamental beliefs about the nature of knowledge, the learner and society, and the relationship between the three. Of course, there is no consensus as to the 'right' or most appropriate curriculum orientation, however for analytical and classificatory purposes we draw on a four-prong typology of curriculum models (see Norwich 2013), outlining this in light of key sociological debate:

- i) classical humanism, (ii) progressivism, (iii) reconstructionism, (iv) learning technology.
 - i) According to the *classical humanism* model, knowledge is seen as a corpus that must be transmitted by teachers to students. It is conservative in that there are seen to be standards as to what knowledge is deemed 'good' and legitimate, linked closely with the ideology of the ruling class. This model has its roots in ancient Greek philosophy (e.g. Plato's theory of Forms). Such understandings of knowledge have been subject to much challenge since the late 20th century, particularly evident in Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, Apple's (1979) neo-Marxist analysis of the curriculum, state, political economy and culture, and in Michael Young's influential call to understand the constructed and politicised nature of knowledge and its role in reproducing inequalities in *Knowledge and Control* (1971). Young has, however, more recently gained attention for what has been seen as quite a radical shift in stance (e.g. White 2018), arguing that some forms of knowledge are 'better' (i.e. epistemically, morally or aesthetically) than others and should be taught as part of the curriculum. This is what Young terms 'powerful knowledge' as opposed to 'knowledge of the powerful' (i.e. knowledge authorised by those in power) (Young 2008; Young and Muller 2013).
 - ii) *Progressivism* refers to a more person-centred approach, the origin of which dates back to the Enlightenment (c.18th). Here, there is a romantic rejection of the traditional authoritarian and hierarchical educational model, and the child/young person is seen as needing to discover knowledge for themselves and develop through their own experiences. This model emphasises freedom, self-expression, and learning as discovery, with the influence of society seen as a corrupting force. Progressivism was once dominant in the sociology of education as a critique of neoconservative and classical approaches (Moore and Young 2009), however postmodern perspectives have gained increased traction in recent decades (e.g. Usher and Edwards 1994; Slattery 2013).
 - iii) The *reconstructionism* model differs from the progressive model as it is less focused on the individual and emphasises the importance of society. It is linked with Dewey's (1916) ideas about education for democracy, to improve society, and to promote individual growth through progression. Here, there is recognition that the child and their

unique dispositions, habits and histories are important, but that wider society (i.e. family, communities, nations) must be recognised as contextualising learning. The curriculum is to be understood as inducting individuals into the norms and values of society (or a potential envisioned society). For reconstructionists, progressivism can be critiqued on the grounds that it lacks the strong commitment and intent to lead to meaningful social change (Stanley 1992).

- iv) The *learning technology* model is aligned with rationalism, learning effectiveness, and a 'technical problem solving framework' (Norwich 2013: 57). In this approach, a single model is applied across all types and areas of learning, with educational intentions and learning outcomes seen as specific and measurable. This aligns with a utilitarian approach to learning and 'best-practice' propositions. It might also be seen as linked with technical-instrumentalism, i.e. a style of a managerial regulation in educational institutions that is bound up with performative regimes (e.g. performance indicators, targets, ranking tables), and curricula for workplace relevance (see Beck 1999; Wheelahan 2010).

It might be that in reality, educational establishments adopt a combination of aspects of these models; however, there are deep-running tensions between the four models at the philosophical level that are less easy to resolve. The significance of this discussion and of these curricular models in terms of theorising the *inclusive* curriculum is that questions might be raised as to which of these models might most closely resemble or embody the values of 'inclusiveness'. This point will be returned to later.

Disciplinary domains: internal structures and key propositions

What is also relevant when considering notions of the inclusive curriculum in HE is the significance of disciplinary domains. Disciplines have long garnered interest as a key organising structure within universities. Biglan (1973a, 1973b) was the first scholar to popularise the terms 'hard', 'soft', 'pure' and 'applied' as used to classify academic disciplines, based on perceived differences in epistemic orientation, teaching approaches, curricula and methods of assessment (e.g. maths as a 'hard pure' discipline, and education as a 'soft applied' discipline). These ideas were later developed by Kolb (1981) and Becher (1989, 1994), the latter of whom sought to account for the social, cultural and cognitive styles of disciplines, subsequently arguing for disciplines to be seen as akin to 'tribes and territories'. Such classificatory typologies have proved influential in scholarly and public discourse, however more recently, questions have been raised as to the strongly essentialist nature of such typologies and the assumed rigidity of boundary lines. In response, there has been a shift towards understandings of disciplinary cultures that greater emphasises their fluidity and transience (e.g. Trowler 2014).

When considering the connection between disciplinary domains and possible understandings of the inclusive curriculum, it follows that different disciplines will have different aims and purposes, with subsequent implications at the level of practice (i.e. teaching, curricula, assessment). Depending on how one interprets inclusion, it could logically follow that certain fields can be seen as more (or less) 'inclusive' than others because of their philosophical orientation; for example, inclusion is often linked closely with social constructivist approaches to learning and critical and emancipatory scholarship (see Stentiford

and Koutsouris 2021). These approaches are less commonly associated with hard pure disciplines such as physics and chemistry where learning activity tends to be instructive and focused, and more commonly associated with discursive and interpretive disciplines such as English (Neumann, Parry, and Becher 2002). However, in a cyclical manner, the extent to which a discipline might be understood as inclusive depends on how one understands and conceptualises inclusion.

Aims of the review

The purpose of this scoping review was to understand how academics have, to date, understood, conceptualised and sought to investigate the ‘inclusive curriculum’ in the context of HE. When devising the search strategy, we considered carefully the specific search terms we should use to capture relevant literature. We are cognisant that understandings of the inclusive curriculum might be seen as connected with related concepts such as the ‘feminist curriculum’, ‘decolonising the curriculum’, and ‘diversifying the curriculum’. However, we made a conscious decision to focus solely on research using the term ‘inclusive curriculum’ for analytic precision, so that we could identify what research is embedded within, and promulgates the discourse of inclusion in HE. We also discuss later philosophical tensions between discourses relating to, in particular, decolonising the curriculum and the inclusive curriculum which meant we felt it was important not to subsume these two bodies of literature together.

Our overarching goal in this review was to critically unpack the theoretical ideas underpinning academics’ understandings of inclusion, and discuss attendant implications at both a philosophical and practical level—informed by the ideas outlined above. The aim was not to map out and assess the efficacy of the strategies or approaches offered up by authors in their texts as ‘evidence’ of an inclusive curriculum, as might be common in a traditional systematic review. Rather, we wanted to understand *how* research has been conceptualised in the field. The research questions guiding this review were as follows:

- Are there any patterns in the peer-reviewed published literature relating to the inclusive curriculum in HE by date, country, purpose or method?
- How have scholars researched the inclusive curriculum in HE, and what facets of diversity are placed under focus (e.g. gender, social class, ethnicity, disability etc.)?
- What theoretical ideas underpin scholars’ conceptualisations of the inclusive curriculum, and what are the attendant implications of these conceptualisations?

Methodology

We conducted a systematic scoping review in accordance with the steps outlined by Arksey and O’Malley (2005) and Levac, Colquhoun, and O’Brien (2010).

Search strategy and search terms: We wanted to locate texts where the explicit phrase ‘inclusive curriculum’ had been used and where authors had placed a substantial focus on this concept. The specific search terms we used are outlined below, with the two sets of terms cross-searched in title and abstract fields:

Inclusive curriculum terms—‘inclusive curricul*’; ‘curricul* * inclusiv*’; ‘curricul* * inclusion*’

HE terms—‘higher education*’; universit*; college*; ‘tertiary education*’; ‘tertiary institut*’

Database searching: We searched five electronic databases in July 2021—British Education Index, Education Research Complete, ERIC, Web of Science, International Bibliography of the Social Sciences, and Australian Education Index. Results were limited to peer-reviewed texts.

Inclusion criteria: To be included in this review, texts had to meet the following criteria (no date or country restriction was placed on the search):

- Be published in English.
- Focus on HEIs that offer full degree programmes.
- Focus on the inclusive curriculum in the HE context, i.e. studies focusing on teacher trainees’ induction into the inclusive curriculum for use in schools were excluded, as were studies where the inclusive curriculum was offered up by authors as a subsidiary recommendation.
- Be of any study design/method, including any supporting theoretical framework, e.g. interview, focus group, questionnaire, secondary data analysis, evaluation, etc.
- Qualitative, quantitative, mixed method and conceptual/argument pieces could be included.

Selection: After performing the database searches, we exported the titles and abstracts of located texts to EndNote and duplicate records were removed. The titles and abstracts of the texts were then screened for relevance by LS, who marked them as either include or exclude according to the above criteria. Full text copies of the texts were obtained and again assessed for inclusion by LS. Both the title and abstract and full text screening stages were conducted following a pilot stage where 20% of the records were screened independently by LS and GK who then came together to discuss and agree on screening decisions.

Additional search strategies: To maximise the number of relevant texts located, we undertook forwards and backwards citation chasing. This involved scanning the reference lists of included full texts for potentially relevant literature (backwards chasing), and inputting the titles into Google Scholar to scan all citing literature (forwards chasing).

We have reported the number of studies identified, included and excluded at each stage of the review using a flow diagram (Figure 1).

Quality: We opted to use Dixon-Woods et al. (2006) quality assessment criteria to assess the quality of the located texts, which involves judging texts according to those that appear most relevant to the aim of the review rather than on methodological standards. This prevents potentially useful texts from being excluded unnecessarily. This was performed by LS and GK, who agreed that all located texts should be included in this review as they addressed the review’s aims.

Data charting: We developed a data charting form for this review, guided by the full text screening stage. Data was charted by LS and GK and the information recorded included: first author, date, country, study design, methods, aspect of diversity under focus, approach to inclusion, and theoretical underpinnings.

Analysis: We used a form of thematic and discursive analysis (Potter and Wetherell 1987; Thomas and Harden 2008) to identify key themes emerging from the texts. LS read the texts multiple times to gain familiarity with the content, jotting down any initial thoughts about the texts and similarities and differences. LS then imported the texts into NVivo

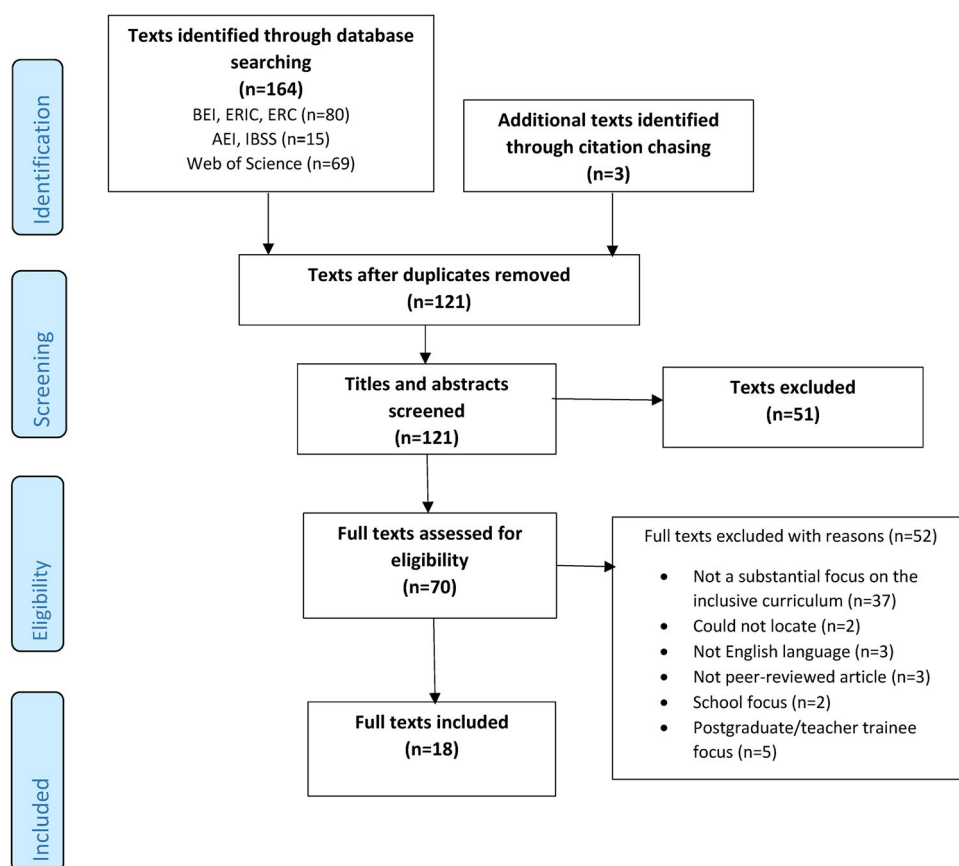


Figure 1. Flow diagram.

software and LS and GK coded the texts line-by-line; the approach taken was both inductive and deductive, based on theoretical insights from the inclusion literature and the research questions, but we also sought to account for emerging themes. We paid particularly close attention to how the authors appeared to have understood and discursively ‘framed’ inclusion, including tensions and inconsistencies in analytical focus and conceptualisation.

Findings

We begin by providing a descriptive overview of the final set of included texts ($n = 18$), before moving on to present key themes that emerged from the studies. See [Table 1](#) for a descriptive summary of the texts.

Date

Of the located texts, one was published in the 1980s, one in the 1990s, one in the 2000s, and the remaining 15 were published from 2010-present. The year when the highest number of texts was published was 2020 ($n = 4$).

Table 1. Descriptive overview.

First author	Date	Journal	Country	Purpose of study	Aspect of diversity under focus	Discipline	Paper format	Study design
Andersen	1987	Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society	USA	Reflection on what an inclusive curriculum might look like	Gender	All	Narrative	Essay
Azzopardi	2013	Journal of Clinical Nursing	Australia	Outlining or assessing a strategy/approach	Disability	Nursing	Narrative	Project reflection
Barkas	2020	International Journal of Inclusive Education	UK	Exploring student views/perceptions	Disability	All	Empirical	Qualitative
Baron	2018	South African Journal of Higher Education	South Africa	Outlining or assessing a strategy/approach	Ethnicity	Electrical engineering	Narrative	Project reflection
Bunbury	2020	International Journal of Inclusive Education	UK	Exploring staff views/perceptions	Disability	Law	Empirical	Qualitative
Carey	2012	International Journal of Inclusive Education	UK	Exploring staff views/perceptions	Student diversity	Nursing	Empirical	Phenomenographic
Dracup	2020	International Journal of Inclusive Education	Australia	Outlining or assessing a strategy/approach	Socio-economic status	Social sciences; education	Narrative	Project reflection
Everett	2018	Teaching in Higher Education	UK and USA	Outlining or assessing a strategy/approach	Disability	All	Empirical	Case study
Garibay	2016	Journal of Diversity in Higher Education	USA	Outlining or assessing a strategy/approach	Ethnicity	Environmental and sustainability studies	Empirical	Secondary data analysis
Garvey	2015	Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice	USA	Exploring student views/perceptions	Sexuality	All	Empirical	Secondary data analysis
Goduka	1996	South African Journal of Higher Education	USA	Arguing for an inclusive curriculum in HE	Student diversity	All	Narrative	Essay
McDuff	2020	Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning	UK	Outlining or assessing a strategy/approach	Student diversity	All	Narrative	Project reflection
Mills	2003	Journal of Professional Issues in Engineering Education and Practice	Australia and UK	Outlining or assessing a strategy/approach	Gender	Engineering	Narrative	Project reflection
Moriña	2014	Disability & Society	Spain	Exploring student views/perceptions	Disability	Health and experimental sciences; social sciences; engineering and technology; humanities	Empirical	Biographical-narrative
Nasri	2021	International Journal of Inclusive Education	Malaysia	Exploring student views/perceptions	Ethnicity	Education	Empirical	Qualitative
Rasi	2015	Teaching in Higher Education	Finland	Outlining or assessing a strategy/approach	International students	Media education	Empirical	Case study
Rios	2010	Psychology of Women Quarterly	USA	Outlining or assessing a strategy/approach	Gender	Political psychology	Empirical	Quasi-experimental design
Wray	2013	Nurse Education Today	UK	Outlining or assessing a strategy/approach	Disability	Nursing	Empirical	Evaluation

Country

The texts were authored by academics originating largely from Western OECD countries (16 out of 18), the two exceptions being from South Africa (Baron 2018) and Malaysia (Nasri, Nasri, and Abd Talib 2021). There were 5 texts each from the UK and USA, two from Australia, and one each from Finland and Spain. There were two texts where authors collaborated in two different countries (UK and Australia, and USA and UK).

Journal

There was a relatively diverse spread of journals in which the texts were published, with the highest number in *International Journal of Inclusive Education* (n = 5), followed by the *South African Journal of Higher Education* (n = 2) and *Teaching in Higher Education* (n = 2). Single papers were published in journals with an HE focus (e.g. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*), a discipline-specific focus (*Journal of Clinical Nursing*, *Nurse Education Today*, *Journal of Professional Issues in Engineering Education and Practice*), and journals focused on broader diversity issues/social inequalities (*Disability & Society*, *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *Signs*).

How 'curriculum' is defined

We attempted to categorise how the authors of the texts had defined 'curriculum' in their work, either based on authors' explicit descriptions or how we felt they had understood the curriculum. Overall, 6 texts appeared to have a sole focus on syllabus (i.e. the content of what is taught) (e.g. Baron 2018; Garibay and Vincent 2016). The remaining 12 texts contained evidence of a broader conceptualisation that incorporated the three elements of: (i) syllabus; (ii) pedagogy (i.e. the 'how' of teaching); and (iii) assessment (e.g. Mills and Ayre 2003).

Purpose

We also sought to classify the broad purpose of each text and established five different categories. We categorised the majority as 'Outlining or assessing a strategy/approach for facilitating an inclusive curriculum' (n = 10). This included Rios, Stewart, and Winter (2010) who examined the effects of introducing women exemplars into a mainstream (i.e. not 'women's studies') political psychology undergraduate course at a US university. The authors considered, in particular, whether this influenced students' gendered perceptions of their leadership capability and future career opportunities. McDuff et al.'s (2020) paper was devoted to presenting an 'Inclusive Curriculum Framework' initiative that the authors had devised and implemented at the University of Kingston in England.

We categorised four texts as 'Exploring student views/perceptions of an inclusive curriculum'. For example, Moriña, Cortés, and Melero (2014) discussed with disabled students their perceptions of studying at university and the barriers affecting their access, academic performance, and overall experience in one Spanish HEI. In contrast, Garvey and Rankin (2015) examined the extent to which variables including inclusive curricula influenced LGBTQ undergraduates' perceptions of classroom climate in a sample of US universities.

A further two texts were categorised as ‘Exploring staff views/perceptions of an inclusive curriculum’. Bunbury (2020), for example, sought to examine how law lecturers in one English university viewed the inclusive curriculum and the legal requirement to make reasonable adjustments for disabled students.

Only two texts were classified as having a different purpose; namely, Goduka’s (1996) text was categorised as ‘Arguing for an inclusive curriculum in HE’. This paper took the form of an essay in which the author argued that traditionally white universities in South Africa should be challenged to promote diversity and develop inclusive curricula to ‘restore human dignity and respect lost during the apartheid regime’ (p. 27). Andersen’s (1987) paper was classified as a ‘Reflection on what an inclusive curriculum might look like’. Here, the author reviewed critically the place of women studies in HE in the 1980s and considered what a gender inclusive curriculum might look like in other disciplines.

Format and methods

Out of the 18 texts, 7 were categorised as narrative pieces and 11 presented empirical data. The narrative texts comprised project reflections (n = 5) and essays (n = 2). The empirical texts employed a variety of quantitative and qualitative designs including case study (e.g. Everett and Oswald 2018), secondary data analysis (e.g. Garibay and Vincent 2016; Garvey and Rankin 2015), and a quasi-experimental design (Rios, Stewart, and Winter 2010). Methods used included semi-structured interviews (e.g. Barkas, Armstrong, and Bishop 2020), discussion groups (e.g. Moriña, Cortés, and Melero 2014), and document analysis (e.g. Rasi, Hautakangas, and Väyrynen 2015).

Aspect of student diversity under focus

The texts placed a focus on different aspects of student diversity—all of whom might be considered non-traditional groups or those historically marginalised in HE. The majority of texts focused primarily on disability (n = 6), followed by gender (i.e. women) (n = 3), ethnicity (n = 3), sexuality (i.e. LGBTQ) (n = 1), social class (i.e. low SES) (n = 1), and international students (n = 1). Only three papers conceptualised the inclusive curriculum in a more holistic sense and focused on various or intersecting aspects of student diversity (n = 3).

Theoretical approaches taken

We attempted to classify the texts according to the four-prong typology of curriculum models outlined above—see Table 2. It should again be noted that these classifications are based on our interpretation of authors’ theoretical orientations, rather than as stated by the authors themselves.

Learning technology

We felt that the majority of texts (n = 10) took a learning technology approach whereby authors described, investigated and/or recommended practical strategies that could be implemented by HE educators to ‘create’ an inclusive curriculum. For example, Bunbury (2020) appeared

Table 2. Theoretical approaches.

Curriculum model	Approach	First author/focus
Learning technology	Adaptations and adjustments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Azzopardi • Barkas • Bunbury • Moriña
	Universal Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dracup • Everett • Wray
	Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Garibay: race • Garvey: LGBTQ • Rios: gender
Reconstructionism	Transformational change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Andersen: gender • Goduka: dignity and respect • Rasi: culture
	Co-creating the curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baron • Nasri
Learning technology and reconstructionism	Adaptations and adjustments; representation; transformational change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mills: gender • McDuff: diversity
	Tensions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carey

to understand the inclusive curriculum in a legalistic sense and as realised when learning, teaching and assessment are carefully designed to prevent the need for ‘reasonable adjustments’—a legal policy term contained in the UK Equality Act 2010. This is perhaps unsurprising given Bunbury’s background as a ‘lecturer and disability tutor in a [London-based] Law School’ (p. 970). In contrast, Moriña, Cortés, and Melero (2014) outlined and discussed examples of ‘uninclusive’ practices narrated by a sample of disabled students studying at the University of Seville. This included lecturers condensing courses into short time periods, not providing recorded lectures, not making slides available in advance, adopting a ‘transmission’ teaching approach, and making insufficient adaptations to exams.

Three sets of authors in this category drew upon the principles of Universal Design (UD) (or Universal Design for Learning) to conceptualise the inclusive curriculum (Dracup, Austin, and King 2020; Everett and Oswald 2018; Wray et al. 2013). UD has its origins in the USA and the field of architecture and is based on the principle that proactive inclusive design can prevent the need for adaptations to be made retrospectively. When translated into educational practice, an emphasis is placed on educators designing the curriculum to promote access, participation and progress for all learners at the outset. For example, Everett and Oswald (2018) outlined a trans-Atlantic project that ‘utilised student employees to convert and develop inclusive learning materials for their peers [with disabilities]’ (p. 2).

Others categorised as taking a learning technology approach understood the inclusive curriculum as being about the dis/proportional representation of minority or historically oppressed groups in the mainstream curriculum (Garibay and Vincent 2016; Garvey and Rankin 2015; Rios, Stewart, and Winter 2010). These authors all took a quantitative approach and sought to ‘quantify’ the representation of the work of under-represented scholars, or examples of the lives and experiences of minority groups, in specific courses of study. They then performed statistical tests to ascertain the impact of this on students’ perceptions or experiences of ‘inclusion’. For example, through secondary data analysis of survey data across 343 interdisciplinary environmental and sustainability degree programs in the USA, Garibay

and Vincent (2016) found that those programs with greater ‘diversity-related content’ might have contributed to an increasing enrolment of ‘students of color’ [sic] (p. 2).

Reconstructionism

We classified five texts as adopting a reconstructionist approach, whereby students were understood as located in social relations which contextualised learning. For example, Goduka (1996) emphasised how an inclusive curriculum in HE in the context of mid-1990s South Africa required educators to adopt a critical and emancipatory stance informed by the work of neo-Marxist scholars such as Giroux, Freire, and Gramsci. Social inequality is quite clearly foregrounded in Goduka’s text, and wider power imbalances in society are understood as needing to be addressed through curricular transformation, which is seen as politicised.

In contrast, both Baron (2018) and Nasri, Nasri, and Abd Talib (2021) focus on the concept of ‘co-creating’ the curriculum, i.e. where students are given the opportunity to communicate their opinions on what should be included in the curriculum, thus ‘empowering’ them to make change. Both sets of authors seem to regard this as a way of challenging traditional hierarchical power structures in HE and having the potential to facilitate social justice. For example, Nasri et al. explored the views of 20 students in one Malaysian university on the value of co-creating curricula, and identified tensions and unwillingness in some students’ narratives. The authors argue that this was in part due to students’ cultural orientation, beliefs, and familiarity with more authoritarian teaching approaches in the Asian context.

Learning technology and reconstructionism

We classified three texts as blending aspects of a learning technology and reconstructionist approach (Carey 2012; Mills and Ayre 2003; McDuff et al. 2020). Mills and Ayre (2003), for example, discuss practical strategies for educators in engineering to modify their practice to foster a more ‘welcoming’ climate for women. However, they also emphasise that this is only one step towards achieving an inclusive curriculum, and that ultimately engineering needs to be reconstructed and ‘demasculinised’ in terms of philosophy, aims, objectives, and content. In contrast, McDuff et al. (2020) outline an Inclusive Curriculum Framework (ICF) that universities could adopt. This framework comprises technical and social aspects such as: making the curriculum accessible (e.g. reasonable adjustments to buildings and learning materials); ensuring that students see themselves reflected in the curriculum; and providing opportunities for students to interact with, and learn from diverse peers in globalised society.

Carey’s (2012) paper was interesting in that the author identified *tensions* in a sample of 15 nurse educators’ views as to what the inclusive curriculum meant to them. Carey’s data suggested that some educators saw inclusion as to do with making adaptations and adjustments, whilst others saw it as necessitating curricula be more radically modified in response to wider socio-cultural change.

Liberal humanism and progressivism

The two models of classical humanism and progressivism were not identified in any of the located texts. The significance of this finding is discussed later on.

The significance of disciplinary context

One third of the texts (6 out of 18) discussed the inclusive curriculum in a generic sense, seemingly in reference to all disciplines (see [Table 1](#)). Others focused on one specific discipline (e.g. law in [Bunbury 2020](#); political psychology in [Rios, Stewart, and Winter 2010](#); $n = 9$). Two papers focused on two or more named disciplines ([Dracup, Austin, and King 2020](#); [Moriña, Cortés, and Melero 2014](#)).

Three texts discussed the inclusive curriculum in relation to the discipline of nursing ([Azzopardi et al. 2013](#); [Carey 2012](#); [Wray et al. 2013](#)). All three sets of authors appeared to recognise (either implicitly or explicitly) that there were particular challenges in this discipline due to tensions between: (1) a desire to include all students on moral and social justice grounds, and; (2) to ensure that all students meet professional competencies required to practice nursing safely in the workplace. Similar issues were mentioned by [Baron \(2018\)](#) who focused on the discipline of electrical engineering.

Discussion

We now move on to reflect critically on the wider significance of these findings. The descriptive findings show growing interest in the inclusive curriculum more recently, with 15 out of the 18 papers published between 2010-present. There was also a small ‘spike’ in 2020 with 4 papers published. This perhaps aligns with the above mentioned increase in attention paid to matters of inclusion in education by international bodies in recent decades (e.g. [UNESCO 2015](#)). It might also link with the recent emergence of high-profile social movements in response to incidents that have occurred in the late 2010s that have gained considerable media coverage worldwide and provoked a strong emotional response from the public (e.g. Black Lives Matter, #MeToo). It should be borne in mind, however, that the overall number of texts located over the 40 year period was reasonably low ($n = 18$). This could be because this search was focused on identifying texts where authors had used the explicit phrase ‘inclusive curriculum’. Yet, doing so enabled us to ascertain very clearly what research has been conducted ‘in the name’ of this concept.

The high concentration of papers emanating from Western OEDC countries (16 out of 18) could suggest that academics in such nations are more interested in matters relating to the inclusive curriculum; however, it is perhaps more likely that these are countries with an internationalised HE sphere and whose historical legacies are bound up with asymmetrical power relations that require critical reflection, e.g. colonialism, slavery, patriarchy ([Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou 2010](#)). It must also be noted that only English language papers were included in this review which will impact on the nature of the texts identified. The papers were published in a variety of journals with no clear-cut trends towards certain fields of scholarship (e.g. sociology, psychology), suggestive that the topic is of interest to researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds.

Inclusive curriculum as a conceptual frame

It was notable that the authors of the texts wrote about the inclusive curriculum in relation to different groups of students. Given the strong historical association between inclusion and disability, it is not an unexpected finding that the highest single number of texts

focused on disabled students ($n = 6$). Small pockets of literature focused on women ($n = 3$) and ethnic minorities ($n = 3$), but only one paper each focused on LGBTQ students, students from less affluent backgrounds, and international students—the latter of which might be viewed as another minority group in HE. It could be that academics working from, for example, a feminist or postcolonial perspective use different terms and draw on different conceptual framings in order to understand matters of inequality in relation to the curriculum in HE. For instance, there is a burgeoning literature relating to ‘decolonising the curriculum’ (e.g. Arday, Belluigi, and Thomas 2021; Harvey and Russell-Mundine 2019) and longer established approaches such as culturally relevant and sustainable pedagogy (e.g. Ladson-Billings 1995; Paris 2012). Feminist work informed by postmodernism and poststructuralism often focuses greater on the fluid nature of knowledge, and educators’ and students’ autobiographical subjectivity that can reveal exclusions and objectifications, thus shifting the analytic lens (Cary 2007). And there has been a more recent turn towards new material approaches to the curriculum that work to upend ‘everything we think we know about *being*’ (i.e. the ontological turn) (St. Pierre 2016: 1), with considerable implications for any understanding of what should be taught in educational institutions and how (see Snaza et al. 2016).

It is also the case that not all scholars—and particularly those working from critical, radical and emancipatory perspectives (e.g. those calling for decolonising the academy)—have been keen to draw on the rhetoric of inclusion, as it can be perceived as not going far enough to dismantle the deeper structures in education (and wider society) that maintain inequalities (e.g. Schucan Bird and Pitman 2020). For example, inclusion has been criticised as a colonial project grounded in Western knowledge, developed in the ‘resource-rich North’ (Walton 2018: 31). These criticisms are often grounded in an understanding of inclusion as *additive*—that is, students who are perceived as different are ‘Othered’ when we speak of inclusion for it is implied that they need to *assimilate* within the dominant cultures from which they are being excluded (Dunne 2009). So, then, any talk of an inclusive curriculum might signal that one accepts the curriculum in its current state, and neglects that institutions might need to make more radical changes to address deep-rooted inequalities (Burke 2016). It also makes the project of inclusion seem like an easy and simple process—for example, that educators merely need to adapt existing teaching materials—when in fact complex and multiple forms of exclusion can co-exist. Some have even questioned whether the discourse of inclusion, once a radical call for change grounded in rights-based politics, has become too generalised, diffuse and tamed and has lost its critical edge to be of significant value (Slee 2003; Thomas and Loxley 2001).

Theoretical underpinnings—narrow understandings of inclusion?

Through considering the theoretical underpinnings of the approaches taken, it became clear that the authors of most texts tended to understand the inclusive curriculum in fairly narrow and procedural terms, as about making changes to established practices—classified here as a learning technology approach ($n = 10$). The authors of 5 texts adopted a reconstructionist approach whereby the social context in which learning takes place was acknowledged, and the impact of cultural systems were foregrounded—with all five authors taking a critical slant and identifying inequalities in dominant curricular forms that need some

form of change or transformation. Three texts were classified as blending aspects of a learning technology and reconstructionist approach.

It is noteworthy that no authors adopted a classical humanist or progressive approach. The former might, on the surface, be seen as understandable given that such a curricular model has been linked with conservatism and a knowledge-centred, hierarchical instructional style, whereby a scholarly canon is transmitted to students. There have long been calls that this approach cannot be interpreted as embodying inclusive principles (e.g. social justice, equality) given that it is supportive of the status quo and lacks a politicised and emancipatory agenda (Freire 1985; hooks 1994). Yet there is a counter to this position—if one instead conceptualises inclusion in the context of the curriculum as being about giving students access to forms of knowledge that might empower them, realise their intellectual potential, and enable them to think critically, classical humanism might be considered inclusive. This links with debates emerging recently in the sociology of the curriculum, particularly surrounding Young's (2018) concept of 'powerful knowledge'. This concept is grounded in the social realist assumption that there exist characteristics of knowledge that are objective and identifiable, and that certain forms of knowledge are 'better' and more universal than others and bestow power upon the acquirer. 'Powerful knowledge' is understood as differentiated from general knowledge and is open to challenge, but is 'nearer to truth about the world we live in and to what it is to be human' (2013: Young, 2013: 107). It could be argued that this in fact represents an inclusive approach to the curriculum, for as Young and Muller (2013) contend: 'If we accept the fundamental human rights principle that human beings should be treated equally, it follows that any curriculum should be based on an entitlement to this knowledge' (p. 231). Such ideas and tensions were not engaged with by the authors of the located texts, indicative of a lack of conceptually advanced articles in the inclusive curriculum field.

It was also interesting that no authors worked from a progressive approach, which might be understood as person-centred and less hierarchical. Because the aim in the progressive model is to let the child or young person discover knowledge for themselves and to follow their inclinations, it might be assumed that this embodies certain values that are emblematic of an inclusive approach (e.g. respect, dignity, personal empowerment). However, in this review, authors instead tended to understand the inclusive curriculum as necessarily society-centred rather than person-centred, and as about the curriculum needing to be reworked to represent plural and diverse society (reconstructionism). This represents an approach to inclusion in which the position of others as located within the wider power structures in society are privileged over the individual and their personal desires.

This can be connected to the broader debate between individuality and commonality, often discussed in the inclusion literature (Norwich and Koutsouris 2017), and in the context of HE (Stentiford and Koutsouris 2021). Inclusion, seen as a social good of ethical significance, has often been connected to commonality approaches (Norwich 2013). This assumption lies in an understanding of inclusion as an ethical project that each one of us is responsible to undertake for the benefit of society (Allan 2005)—and in this sense challenging approaches that emphasise the role of individuals. This is reflected in the findings of the review, where reconstructionist approaches (focusing on society) were seen as appropriate for a basis for an inclusive curriculum ($n = 5$), whereas progressive approaches (focusing on individuals) were not identified.

A focus on learning technology in the located texts (n=10) also seems to point to an approach to education that prioritises a measurable and outcomes-driven approach to education, as the result of neo-liberal influences. Biesta (2007) asserts that '[educational] research nor professional action can or should only focus on the most effective means to bring about predetermined ends...[but] should also engage in inquiry about ends...' (p. 17). So, the question that Biesta (2007; 2009) raises is what we want from education: just qualification (knowledge skills and understanding)—or also socialisation (being inducted in a society and culture), and subjectification (developing a distinct way of being)? Qualification is particularly emphasised in the current market-driven educational culture, and often at the expense of the other purposes, also evident from the review findings. This highlights how conceptualisations of inclusion mirror broader debates relating to the incursion of neo-liberal regimes into the educational sphere (Ball 2016).

The significance of disciplinary context for understanding and realising inclusion

Another potentially significant finding in this review relates to disciplinary context that highlights the importance of disciplines for conceptualising inclusion. It was found that educators in nursing, in particular, faced dilemmas regarding the extent to which they could modify curricula in an attempt to embody values such as equal access, participation and social justice (Azzopardi et al. 2013; Carey 2012; Wray et al. 2013). Given that nursing students must undertake clinical placements and be deemed 'safe' to practice, there are questions as to what extent diverse groups of students might be able to fully participate and be afforded pedagogic adaptations such as 'reasonable adjustments' to help them succeed in their studies. Azzopardi et al.'s (2013) text contains the example of a nursing student who needs to have sufficient 'tactile ability' to be able to perform tasks such as taking a patient's pulse accurately (p. 406). These requirements regarding 'fitness-to-practice' are embedded in professionally accredited HE courses that are regulated by professional bodies (e.g. the Nursing and Midwifery Council for nursing in the UK). Similar concerns might be raised in other vocational and/or applied disciplines such as medicine, engineering, law and education, where it is deemed important that students are able to transition to the workplace in a safe and 'competent' manner. This seems to create a limit to the degree to which some students can be included in particular courses, and this is reflected in curriculum design.

It is notable that the above tensions remained largely unconsidered when authors wrote about the inclusive curriculum in the context of less practical disciplines (e.g. social sciences, humanities, experimental sciences), or when authors discussed the inclusive curriculum in relation to all disciplines. This suggests that disciplinary context is currently under-recognised as an axis of significance when considering inclusion in HE. We know from previous HE research the importance of taking a disciplinary lens and considering how the epistemological orientations and knowledge structures of disciplines can impact on the lived experiences of students and academics in the everyday (e.g. Thomas 1990; Becher and Trowler 2001). To add complexity to our current understandings of inclusion, then, deeper attention needs to be paid to how inclusion might be understood, conceptualised and potentially realised/not realised (i.e. values associated with difference and justice) in a variety of academic disciplines.

Indeed, if inclusion is understood as fluid and contingent and open to multiple interpretations (Pirrie and Head 2007)—as supported by the findings of this review—it could

be that we require different expectations of disciplines in terms of inclusion at the curricular level. The hard/soft/pure/applied typology offers one way in which we can think through associated concerns—for example, we could question whether hard pure disciplines such as maths and physics with white masculinist epistemologies can be inclusive of women and minority groups given their historical legacies (e.g. Harding 1986), or whether soft applied disciplines such as nursing and education really can and should be ‘open’ to all e.g. can an individual with severe learning difficulties teach in the primary school classroom? Such thinking is challenging and often involves confronting uncomfortable alternatives. Yet to ignore or ‘brush over’ such complexity is dangerous, for as Allan (2007: 19) contends, ‘inclusion *is and should be* a struggle’ [italics in original], and to do otherwise allows ‘institutions and teachers to evade responsibility for making more significant cultural and political changes in practice and thinking’.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a critical consideration of the drive for the inclusive curriculum in HE, grounded in a systematic scoping review of the research literature. We place the caveat that we have by no means captured all research literature ever written on the topic, but have provided a rigorous mapping of the peer-reviewed literature in an attempt to probe more deeply how academics have conceptualised and researched the ‘inclusive curriculum’. The findings suggest that many authors worked from technicist understandings of inclusion as learning effectiveness and adapting current provision, seemingly prioritising an outcomes-driven approach to education. Authors also considered the socio-political context in which HE takes place (i.e. reconstructionism) and enduring inequalities (gender, ethnicity, social class, disability, sexuality)—but did not favour individuality (i.e. progressivism) or classical humanist approaches. Differing positions connect with authors’ underlying beliefs as to the broader aims and purposes of education, and of inclusion as a goal.

The findings of this review also raise some wider cause for concern. Given that universities worldwide are currently advocating a turn to the ‘inclusive curriculum’ and are championing the use of certain strategies and techniques which are seen as embodying and facilitating inclusion, it is questionable on what grounds these strategies are being promoted—and, in turn, what they might be ‘doing’ within educational spaces. It could be the case that such strategies are in fact reinforcing inequalities as opposed to challenging them. We ultimately conclude that inclusion as an educational discourse—and seemingly increasing ‘buzzword’ in the HE context—needs much greater critical attention, including at the curricular level. It is important that we better understand how disciplinary context might impact on potential conceptualisations of inclusion in HE, and also that we embrace broader educational aims and purposes and philosophical/curricular models when theorising inclusion to enrich current debates. Attention should be paid not only by academics, but by university managers and other key stakeholders. This is important, for it enables us to see where gaps in current understandings might limit the realisation of any ambitions for a more ‘equal’ HE sphere.

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