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Inclusion discourses in contemporary Slovak education policy – From the individual to the community and from right to performance

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Abstract

The study on which this article reports sought to explain the complexity of the relationship between inclusion policies and practices in education in Slovakia. Education policy in Slovakia is characterised by an enduring resistance to inclusion practices, despite the presence of humanist inclusion discourses. Accordingly, education policy and practices in Slovakia manifest a conflicting or parallel application of humanist and neoliberal discourses on inclusion. The analysis presented identifies three types of inclusion discourses in Slovak education policy today: (1) *general individualised*, (2) *specified individualised*, and (3) *neoliberal* discourses. Concrete examples are provided of each of the three types of discourses in Slovak education policy, to illustrate specific educational policies in different education sectors. Specific national challenges related to notions of inclusion and the associated paradoxes and differing perceptions of inclusion are discussed. The conclusion highlights the question of whether a truly democratic society can exist without humanistic and inclusive ideals.

KEYWORDS
critical policy analysis, discourses on inclusion, European Union, inclusive education, Slovakia

1 | INTRODUCTION

Despite being one of the most discussed issues in contemporary pedagogy, it is not always clear what is meant by the term inclusion. A great variety of starting points and principles can be found in education practices: political declarations; curricular documents; academic research; and philosophical thinking on humanist traditions, diversity and democratic citizenship. Contradictions surrounding inclusion in education as a topic complicate both the selection of an established direction for the implementation of inclusion and the acceptance of inclusive principles among the public (Kohout-Diaz & Strouhal, 2022, p. 15). Frequently, the agreed on principles are the outcome of political consensus or academic research and philosophical thinking rather than a response to spontaneous appeals from society.

The present study was conducted at a time when the inclusion component of Slovak education policy was undergoing fundamental changes. We note as a characteristic for post-socialist countries that these changes appear radical. Specifically, in that the current changes are perceived as the result of external political pressure (primarily European Union policies), rather than a process that has emerged autonomously from the local context in Slovakia. The key role played by external actors in instituting inclusion policies draws on the historical and cultural context of post-socialist countries in Europe. From the 1950s onwards the education systems in these countries followed a two-track system with education provision being offered in special schools and mainstream schools. After the fall of communism in the 1990s, post-socialist countries in Europe transitioned progressively to comprehensive schooling. However, exclusion practices continued through segregation of special educational needs students within schools—in an approach where students were viewed using the traditional medical perspective rather than a social integrational discourse.

It is only in the last few decades that the concept of inclusive education has appeared in post-socialist countries. It can therefore be seen as an imported concept linked to international and European Union (EU) policy influences. Research on educational inclusion was in Slovakia introduced through expert and academic discourses on the realities of education in post-socialist countries (Miškolci, 2016). The research highlighted the specific status of inclusion in post-socialist countries historically and in the current context. The study on which this article reports focused on barriers to inclusive education in eastern Europe, selected based on an analysis of local research in post-socialist countries (Stepaniuk, 2019, p. 344). The barriers considered include the lack of statistical data on the population of children with disabilities; stereotypes of people with disabilities; misunderstandings of *inclusion* and *integration*; segregated special schools; lack of experience-sharing opportunities for parents and teachers; and the lack of governmental policies. These barriers apply to Slovakia, where the biggest issue concerning public acceptance and awareness of inclusion are general and widespread stereotypes of Roma pupils—which greatly complicates the political passage and applicability of inclusion policies (Miškolci et al., 2017).

In this article, our aim is not to identify all the problems relating to inclusive education in Slovakia but to analyse the evolving political discourse on inclusive education in Slovakia. We are interested in the current conceptualisation of inclusive education and the degree of coherence across the different levels of political discourse and the various education sectors. For the first time ever, contemporary political initiatives have led to the concept of inclusive education being introduced at the legislative, strategy and system levels. Our focal point therefore is the transitional moment in which older concepts and practices about inclusive education are replaced with new ones. As this transition is taking place at the time of writing, the problems encountered when implementing the new policy, or the educational impact that follows, are not the subject of this article.

2 | CRITICAL POLICY ANALYSIS

We have used a critical policy analysis approach, where the focus is on the policymaking process, specifically:

> [...] to understand policy processes not only in terms of apparent inputs and outputs, but more importantly in terms of the interests, values and normative assumptions—political and social—that shape and inform these processes. (Fischer et al., 2015, p. 1)

Therefore, issues of power and the context of policy implementation are important. Young and Diem (2017) outline what we think are the three key common criteria to be considered when conducting a critical analysis of education policy: (1) paying significant attention to the complex systems and environments in which policy is made; (2) seeing theorising as a vital part of methodology; (3) preferring qualitative research approaches.

As Young and Diem (2017) quite rightly point out, there is a broad range of theoretically diverse studies adopting a critical policy analysis and addressing the points raised above. Our draws on the discursive strand of this range, represented primarily by the work of Sandra Taylor (Taylor, 1997). In this approach, discourse theory and policy document analysis are key to the analysis of education policy. Such documents should be analysed as "*the outcome of political struggles over meaning*" (Taylor, 1997, p. 26).

In the current situation inclusive education is clearly at the centre of such struggles and so various conceptualisations emerge. Critical policy discourse analysis has also been applied to political phenomena associated with previous inclusive trends, such as integration in education (e.g. Fulcher, 1989). Of the contemporary studies focusing on the context of inclusion, it is worth mentioning Hardy and Woodcock (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015), who compared conceptualisations of inclusion in documents and discourses produced by international organisations (UNESCO, OECD) with those from English speaking countries (US, Canada, England, Australia). The critical comparison hinged on the presence of discursive units linked to the neoliberal conceptualisation of inclusion. As Slovak education policy does not exist in a vacuum, one can assume that these meanings have entered inclusive education policy in Slovakia as well.

Our critical policy analysis will therefore focus on current education policy discourse in Slovakia. In the discursive sense of the word,

> [...] policy can be seen as both legislative and regulatory texts (such as curricula or laws), as local governing plans or specifications of bureaucratic procedures, as speeches, reports, contracts, statistical descriptions and statements. (Magnússon et al., 2019, p. 68)

For the purposes of our critical discourse analysis of Slovak education policy we reviewed recent key official education policy documents in Slovakia—a purposive selection of laws, regulations and directives on inclusive education that were adopted in the last two years. Recent legislative amendments are the result of an externally prompted turn in Slovak education policy—the European Union economic recovery package to support EU member states' recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic (the *Next Generation EU* programme). To obtain grants, member states had to submit national Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRPs) setting out targets, milestones, and estimated costs.

Slovakia's national RRP (ÚV SR, 2021) was approved by the European Commission on 21 June 2021. It contains five main priorities, one of which is *Quality Education*, consisting of three key components, including *Accessibility, Development and Quality of Inclusive Education*. The objectives of the national plan are then covered and implemented via the relevant government strategies and action plans. Accordingly, these education policy documents are relevant to our study and were included in the analysis. The term inclusion was first officially introduced into Slovak education policy through these documents.

3 | STRUGGLES FOR INCLUSION PRIOR TO SLOVAKIA'S ALIGNMENT WITH EUROPEAN UNION POLICIES

As noted above, inclusive education had been discussed by experts in Slovakia long before inclusion became part of official education policy. There were even attempts to introduce the concept of inclusion through education policy documents, despite the term's lack of legitimacy, in that it was not recognised by Slovak legislation. An

effort to move away from segregation and exclusionist education legislation through education policy articulations was attempted by a group of academics who were involved in a national EU-funded project, the *Inclusive Education Model for the Pre-primary Level of the Education System* (2013–2015). They analysed the lack of inclusion articulations in Slovak legislation and proposed new principles and a model for creating an inclusive syllabus. Despite only targeting the preschool sector, their work produced interesting results and consequently inclusive education became part of the national preschool curriculum. In other words, the project results were directly incorporated into official education policy. Although these changes did not affect national law or regulations, they had a direct impact on education practices in schools.

Remarkably, the structure of the national curriculum at all education levels is determined by education law, and at the time of the project it was, according to an analysis by the project investigators (Kaščák & Pupala, 2013), very exclusive and dominated by special education elements. By law, the national curriculum for all education levels must include a section titled *Characteristics of Education for Children with Special Educational Needs*. The national curriculum identifies characteristics for three groups of children with special needs: (1) education for pupils with disabilities, (2) education for pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, (3) education for gifted pupils.

As a result of the policy articulation for education inclusion in preschool, the national curriculum for preschool diverged from the curricula for compulsory education and higher education. Following the legislation, it retained the compulsory section entitled *Education for Children with Special Educational Needs*; however, with the addition that conditions for an inclusive education were to be ensured (ŠPÚ, 2016). The content of the section is completely new and differs radically from that in the national curricula for the other education levels. However, by law, the curriculum still must contain the mandatory section aimed exclusively at children with special educational needs. Hence even in this partially inclusive articulation the traditional concept of inclusion is evident:

> In education the notion of inclusion is mainly about the approach taken in relation to children with special educational needs, where the aim is for the majority of these children to be included in mainstream schooling. (ŠPÚ, 2016, p. 108)

Inclusion is therefore used as a mainstreaming strategy. The basic principles of inclusive education in preschools are formulated by the following set of overall principles of inclusion for inclusive education that nursery schools should follow (ŠPÚ, 2016, p. 108).

1. An education for all.
2. Universality and equality in educational goals (for educational outcomes).
3. Diversity and adaptability in identifying and differentiating the initial terms of and progress in education.
4. Processes and approaches are adapted to local community conditions and requirements.
5. Links between school activities and local activities and integrated school activities.
6. Frequent professional development for all collaborating teaching staff.

From a critical policy analysis perspective, we understand this as a strategic policy move made by representatives of the academic sphere. By using their professional capital in an EU funded project, academics gained legitimacy in negotiations with the state bodies responsible for the creation of the national curricula. When writing the preschool curriculum, they did not depart from the formal legislative requirements but simply expanded on them and were thereby able to incorporate their own notion of inclusion into the education policy document shaping the running of preschools. The changes were of course limited, but they are indicative of the pathways, strategies and struggles associated with educational transformation in a situation where the legislation is exclusive.

4 | CONCEPTUALISING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Discursive analysis of the conceptualisation of inclusive education reveals that it is diverse and multi-dimensional. Göransson and Nilholm (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014, p. 268) distinguish the following four basic definitions.

A. *Placement definition*, inclusion as placement of pupils with disabilities and in need of special support in general education classrooms
B. *Specified individualised definition*, inclusion as meeting the social and academic needs of pupils with disabilities and pupils in need of special support
C. *General individualised definition*, inclusion as meeting the social and academic needs of all pupils
D. *Community definition*, inclusion as creation of communities with specific (varied) characteristics

This illustrates two specific types of conceptualisations of inclusive education as either focused on (1) *individual* or (2) *community* development. The *placement* and *specified individualised* definitions clearly correspond more to the older integration discourses. Göransson and Nilholm (2014) add that the *placement* and *specified individualised* categories

> [...] place the issue of inclusion within a special-educational-needs discourse, rather than within a general education discourse. Categories C and D on the other hand, focus on all pupils, which places the issue of inclusion within a general education discourse. (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014, p. 275).

The special educational needs discourse could potentially turn into one of *exclusionary inclusion*, where inclusion is used as a way of accelerating individual performance and hence is also a means of increasing economic profitability (Liasidou, 2012). By contrast, the communitarian discourse is located within the broader socio-political discourse on the democratisation of society, diversity, equity and social justice; it has a clearer philosophical basis (Dickson, 2012). One can therefore contrast the efficacy discourse on inclusion with the rights and ethics discourse on inclusion (Artiles et al., 2006).

As Haug (2017) states, the *placement definition* of inclusion is increasingly commonly found in contemporary education policy discourses. He considers the placement definition and *specified individualised definition* to be the "*narrow definition of inclusion*" (Haug, 2017, p. 208). The further two discourses represent "*the broad definition of inclusion*" (Haug, 2017, p. 209), which is more complex and is associated with various issues, particularly how to avoid losing the focus on pupils with disabilities as opposed to social, religious or gender diversity.

Haug draws attention to a very important distinction. He distinguishes between a horizontal dimension and a vertical dimension of the concept of inclusion. The horizontal dimension is the content side of inclusion as broadly understood in society. "*The vertical dimension concerns the coherence between the different political and organizational levels in society and school*" (2017, pp. 207–208). This distinction is a crucial one. It is important to investigate both the content and definition of inclusion used in the national context as well as the way in which the various conceptualisations are distributed and whether there is any coherence between the political and legislative levels, or the various education levels. In addition to looking at the content dimension, we attempt to answer this question in our analysis.

5 | INCLUSION DISCOURSES IN SLOVAKIA

The *Accessibility, Development and Quality of Inclusive Education* component of Slovakia's national recovery plan (ÚV SR, 2021) has added to the unprecedented dynamic development in education policy in Slovakia. In September

2021, this framework and a technical document was followed by the publication of the *Zero Action Plan for the Strategy for an Inclusion Approach to Education for 2021* (MŠVVaŠ SR, 2021a). It sets out a number of important objectives that are relevant to the present study. The first is to adopt the *Strategy for an Inclusive Approach to Education* and the second is to amend education law 245/2008 to incorporate inclusion as a principle in education, and to redefine special educational needs. The key education law was amended at the end of 2021 and takes effect on 1 January 2022, while the Strategy was adopted on 8 December 2021.

5.1 | General individualised inclusion

Under the amended education law (NR SR, 2008) inclusive education has become one of the basic principles of education (NR SR, 2008, §3). In the national curriculum section of the law (NR SR, 2008, §6 National education programs), the relevant part is now called "*the specific characteristics of education for children with special educational needs and pupils with special educational needs following the principles of inclusive education*" (NR SR, 2008, §6, s 4 L). Thus, one can see that the *partial* approach adopted in the preschool curriculum of 2016 and described above was accepted during the amendment process. Crucially, though, in the amendment, inclusive education is referred to as a basic concept and defined as follows:

> […] a whole-school learning approach to educating children, pupils, learners and participants, provided on an equal opportunities basis and respecting educational needs and individual characteristics and fostering active engagement in the teaching and learning provided by the school or school facility. (NR SR, 2008, §2)

This articulation does not draw on the concept of placement and its scope is wider than the special educational needs discourse. It therefore represents a major departure from the special education tradition of the Slovak and (post-socialist) discourses; a new definition that is rooted in the social concept of equality. However, the articulation does not contain a community aspect; it is closer to what Göransson and Nilholm (2014) refer to as the general individualised definition. In contrast to the objectives of the national inclusive education plan, the *Zero Action Plan* (MŠVVaŠ SR, 2021a), there is no redefinition of the term special educational needs, which may create problems when implementing this concept of inclusion. The definition of inclusive education expands on the special educational needs discourse and is more radically set out in the *Strategy for an Inclusive Approach to Education*.

> Inclusive education is the education of all learners, provided on an equal opportunities basis without discriminating against gender, cultural, religious and language group, socioeconomic status of the family, lifestyle, health and emotional state, talent or belonging to the majority population or an ethnic minority. Based on humanistic principles it guarantees the right to a quality education that respects the characteristics of the individual and the group they belong to. (MŠVVaŠ SR, 2021c, p. 7)

In addition to the general orientation towards and key concept of equality, the anti-discrimination side of inclusion is stressed, and various aspects of pupil diversity are laid out that go beyond the traditional definition of special education needs. It also contains a direct reference to humanism.

> Inclusion is based on the notion that diversity is a natural characteristic of all human groups, including school classes and other groups of learners. In inclusive education this diversity is embraced as an opportunity for mutual enrichment. (MŠVVaŠ SR, 2021c, p. 7)

The idea that diversity is the basis of the learning community, and that education is a process of mutual enrichment is closer to the *community definition*; accordingly, the above quote represents a departure away from the special educational needs discourse in favour of the general education discourse. Moreover, the next paragraph refers to what is here understood as the discursive articulation for *community*.

Inclusion can in this vein be understood as two communities opening up to one another, to cooperate and achieve something important—accepting the other as a partner, companion and co-creator. Formally, this community-oriented definition of inclusion is bipolar in that it does not foresee the creation of a single community; rather cooperation is based on the two communities coming together. It can therefore be seen as an isolationist view of social life that is based on communicating across existing boundaries or cultural differences.

The departure from the special educational needs discourse in favour of the general education discourse is also embodied in the intention to create a model of suitable support measures. The goal is to shift away from the horizontal division of children and pupils by disability, social disadvantage, or talent. Specifically, by changing into a vertical model based on the assessment of the severity of current and long-term barriers to education and the associated need for support that is deemed crucial to fully develop the educational potential of each learner (MŠVVaŠ SR, 2021c, p. 12). However, at the time of writing, this model had not been finalised and moreover the legislation retains the traditional definition of special educational needs.

5.2 | Limits of generality

Taylor et al. (Taylor et al., 1997, p. 33) point out the need to distinguish between two types of policy that are often conflated in education discourses: symbolic policies and material policies. In our case the symbolic policies can be found in documents such as the *Strategy for an Inclusive Approach to Education* (MŠVVaŠ SR, 2021c). Symbolic policies typically deal with the starting points and policy aims, rather than setting out the resources or implementation methods. Conversely, material policies contain the implementation rules or action plans for allocating the funding for the measures. Interestingly, in Slovakia's *First Action Plan for Implementing the Strategy for an Inclusive Approach to Education for 2022–2024* (MŠVVaŠ, 2022), published on 7 June 2022, there is no state funding allocation for introducing inclusion into education, along with the associated measures; instead, the only funding sources are the EU's recovery and resilience plan and other EU grants.

Discourses communicating the symbolic policies must therefore be compared with the material policy discourses as part of the critical policy analysis. However, the ongoing changes make this more difficult as many of the aims and measures are not yet at the implementation stage. At such times, symbolic policies may clash with material policies, which is the case with the current discourse on education in Slovakia. One example is the provision of teaching assistants, which is directly related to inclusive education.

Under the amended law on educational and specialist staff (NR SR, 2019) teaching assistants are a subcategory of educational staff. The use of the term *teaching assistant* in Slovakia reflects the progressive inclusive educational policy as it does not imply that the employee is there to serve a particular child, group of children or teacher (despite the frequent reference to *teacher's assistants* on the education ministry website). Teaching assistants are involved in the education process, the organisation of education and facilitate learning. This criterion is partially fulfilled by the following legal definition:

> The teaching assistant works alongside specialist staff in accordance with the requirements of the teacher, trainer, or instructor to create equal opportunities in education, to help the children, pupils or other groups of children to overcome structural, informational, language, health, social and cultural barriers. (NR SR, 2019, §21)

Creating equal opportunities and helping to overcome barriers therefore lie at the heart of this inclusive identity. Material policies, such as those found in the amendment on the funding of primary schools, secondary schools, and educational facilities (NR SR, 2003), do not, however, contain any reference to the universal category of teaching assistant. Instead, this law refers to the personnel costs relating to teacher's assistants for pupils with disabilities (NR SR, 2003, §3–4a) or to teacher's assistants for pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (NR SR, 2003, §4e), or in the case of preschools to teacher's assistants for children with special educational needs (NR SR, 2003, §6b). The ministry financed assistants therefore operate within the framework of special education needs as defined in the traditional sense of the word (health or social disadvantages) and the teacher's assistant's work is therefore related to a specific child (disabilities) or a sufficiently large group of socially disadvantaged pupils.

The articulations in the law on education staff (NR SR, 2019) and school funding (NR SR, 2003) therefore reflect different policies (symbolic versus material). Ultimately, this shows that insofar as teaching assistants are a factor in the provision of inclusive conditions, they are conceived of in relation to the traditional special educational needs discourse. Also, that the material policy of inclusion relies more on a specific individualised definition of inclusion than that described by Göransson and Nilholm (2014).

5.3 | Neoliberal inclusion

Since the approval of the national recovery plan, the term inclusion has begun to appear in documents dealing with education that relate to non-compulsory education levels such as higher education and adult education. However, in contrast to the lower education levels, the documents that tend to feature inclusion are not legislative documents. For instance, neither the higher education law (NR SR, 2002) nor the law on higher education quality assurance (NR SR, 2018) feature these terms even after the most recent amendments.

They do, however, occur in other types of documents relating to this sector. For instance, in higher education, the *Standards for the Internal Quality Assurance System in Higher Education* contain the term *inclusive conditions* (SAAVŠ, 2020, p. 5), which relates to student admission criteria and the criteria for the provision of higher education programmes. These state that "*when implementing study programmes, student diversity and needs must be respected, and flexible study pathways offered with the option of combining work/family life with higher education studies*" (SAAVŠ, 2020, p. 4).

Inclusion is therefore understood to be the outcome of flexible study conditions. Education is to be individualised and student oriented, but there is no mention of the community or social action. This conceptualisation clearly falls outside the special educational needs discourse and is located within the general education discourse. Moreover, the individualist discourse dominates.

Another conceptualisation of inclusive education is found in the *Strategy for Lifelong Education and Guidance for 2021–2030* (MŠVVaŠ SR, 2021b) approved by the Slovak government on 24 November 2021. Inclusive education is mentioned in the following context:

> The LL [lifelong learning] concept presupposes that inclusion is required and the Strategy for LL and G [guidance] stresses that it is crucial to improve the inclusiveness of education (including for those placed in special education) so as to prevent future generations of adults leaving compulsory schooling with negative attitudes to learning or with insufficient basic skills, as has frequently been the case. The status of marginalised Roma communities is a specific issue regarding inclusion. (MŠVVaŠ SR, 2021b, p. 4)

There are two specific aspects to this conceptualisation—first it refers to *special* groups of learners (those with negative attitudes to learning or lacking basic skills and the Roma). Inclusion is in this example situated within the special

education needs discourse. The second aspect is the link between inclusion and education outcomes—inclusion as a means of preventing unemployability among school leavers. This objective is also the first and basic objective of the strategy; namely "*To bolster the inclusiveness of adult education and improve educational pathways for everyone including adults with poor basic skills* (MŠVVaŠ SR, 2021b, p. 12).

Finding ways to improve and enhance the level of basic skills lies at the core of this concept. It is categorised, much as we categorised it, under one of the four conceptualisations set out in Göransson and Nilholm (2014). However, it also contains a new element that pertains to attainment, effectiveness, or improvement of competencies. Artiles and colleagues (Artiles et al., 2006, p. 261) label this articulation as part of an *efficacy discourse* on inclusion. Liasidou (2012) states that in such cases

> [the] notion of inclusion is subsumed within wider neoliberal concerns over increased productivity, effectiveness, value for money and entrepreneurial capacity. [...] it is understood as the ability of educational systems to re-engage hitherto marginalised and disaffected groups of students in the learning process. (Liasidou, 2012, p. 175)

Hardy and Woodcock (2015) state that "*inclusion and skill development are construed as synonymous*" in the neoliberal conceptualisation of inclusion (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015, p. 148). It is also the way inclusion is typically viewed by the OECD. Kushnir (2020), in her analysis of education policy in higher education, concluded that "*the meaning of inclusion was evolving in its relationship with neoliberalism*" (Kushnir, 2020, p. 497).

The two education sectors mentioned above therefore represent unique examples of the neoliberal concept of inclusion. For higher education, inclusion is articulated as the universal creation of flexible conditions for individual self-directed learning, where the aim is to maximise education effects. The adult education example identifies specific problem groups and goals for improving their competencies. Both examples are about increasing efficiency through educational pathways for successful job placement (Bratland, 2022).

6 | DISCUSSION

The critical policy analysis presented in this article shows that conceptualisations of inclusion vary and that the definitions of inclusion in Slovak education policy lack coherence. Content-wise, current education policy largely builds on the broad definition of inclusion (Haug, 2017) in the form of general individualised inclusion (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). The conceptualisation is localised within the general education discourse and is dominated by rights and ethics discourses (Artiles et al., 2006). Some aspects resemble *community definitions*, but remain underdeveloped.

We have also observed the use of a narrow definition of inclusion (Haug, 2017) in Slovak education policy discourses, in the form of the specified individualised definition (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). The specified individualised approach aligns with traditional special educational needs discourses.

Meanwhile, in contemporary Slovak education policy discourse there is a conceptualisation of inclusion that is centred around a discourse on efficacy (Artiles et al., 2006) and tends to be labelled as neoliberal (Liasidou, 2012). Different manifestations of this concept are present both in (1) special educational needs discourses that relate to lifelong education and adult education, and (2) a general education discourse that relates to higher education.

The different articulations of education inclusion observed were relatively evenly distributed across various education levels and associated education policies. Accordingly, the variation observed is determined by what we identify as a vertical and horizontal topography of the Slovak education sector. The horizontal plane represents in this visualisation the various education levels. Diametrically different definitions exist between the various compulsory education sectors—pre-primary, primary and secondary education, and between the various levels

of tertiary and adult education. The key difference appears to be in the purpose of inclusion—achieving equality versus individual access to the job market.

The vertical plane represents different education policy levels, particularly in compulsory education. Here the difference between the symbolic policy level and material policy level is key (Taylor et al., 1997). Symbolic policies articulated in strategic and conceptual documents tend to fall within the broader definition of inclusion based on the rights and ethics discourse, often within a general education discourse. More substantive policies represented by laws and education regulations tend to rely on an individualised, narrower definition of inclusion, located within the special educational needs discourse. Both types of policies exist in parallel in contemporary Slovak education policy and give rise to tensions and practical complications, as we have noted in relation to teaching assistants. This could subsequently block progress in inclusive education in line with Haug's hypothesis that "*the fact that special education has dominated the debate in the field of inclusive education could have stagnated both practical and theoretical developments*" (Haug, 2017, p. 213).

7 | CONCLUSION

Although it is true that education is mainly a national and therefore local concern, in Slovakia, the European impetus that has led to a systematic emphasis on inclusion is to be welcomed. In Slovakia (and in the Czech Republic) projects criticised by Europhiles (such as the recovery and resilience plans) have clearly benefitted the country. Like in many other post-socialist countries, in Slovakia there was, and to some degree still is, a disconnect between the concepts of the person, their education and democratic traditions. Sadly, the promising developments in Czechoslovakia were prematurely and brutally stopped in their tracks in 1948. But if we subscribe to the humanist tradition and the ideal of democratic citizenship, any model other than inclusive education is unacceptable. John Dewey spelled this out already in 1916 when he systematically linked the future of Wester societies with democratic education (Dewey, 2016). In this vein, democracy is not just about the division of power but about equity between people and fostering democratic values through education. Hence the need to ensure that everyone has comparable opportunities to participate in education. As a system that offers support to overcome inequalities, inclusion is essential to achieving the democratic ideal (Kohout-Diaz & Strouhal, 2022, p. 15; Malet, 2022, p. 46).

As previous research and these examples from Slovakia show, discursive practices and the lack of coherence between types of discourses and traditions are key factors hampering the successful introduction and implementation of inclusive education across all levels of education and education policy. This study contributes to a better understanding among stakeholders to help overcome differences—most of which do not stem from a rejection of inclusion per se but from discursive obstacles and so can be resolved.

But we should also welcome a variety of conceptualisations of inclusion in Slovakia. For, as the first Czechoslovak president Tomáš G. Masaryk stated, democracy is like a discussion in that it requires the continual input of new ideas—among which the best ones should be selected. Above all though, we should not forget that inclusion is not meant to be one-sided, whittled down to just one of its many social impacts. We must strive to understand it in all its complexity. Inclusion cannot simply be an academic talking point, a political project or even, as proposed in neoliberal discourse, a means of achieving equality in the labour market.

We propose that inclusion as an education principle should be understood in the Masaryk spirit: as a belief in humans and in humanity—a humanist educational ideal of democratic society achieved through professional expertise and critical thinking. However, a truly complex humanist approach ought to consider the irrevocable tension that exists between the *individualist* and the *communitarian* emphasis on inclusion. This tension is also one of the key characteristics of the current conceptualisation of inclusion in Slovakia.

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