

From Integration to Inclusion: Kindergarten and Early Primary Teachers' Representations of Inclusive Education

Goulet, Nathalie

Professor, University of Quebec in Montreal, Canada

Boily, Manon

University of Quebec in Montreal, Canada

Desrosiers, Karine

University of Quebec in Montreal, Canada

Allaire, Marie-Christine

University of Quebec in Montreal, Canada

Abstract:

Inclusive education is increasingly recognized as a fundamental right and a cornerstone of equitable educational systems (UNESCO, 2021). Over recent decades, educational policies have shifted from integration-oriented approaches toward broader conceptions of inclusion emphasizing participation, belonging, equity, and educational success for all children (Slee, 2011; UNESCO, 2021). Despite these advances, recent research continues to highlight conceptual ambiguities regarding the meaning and implementation of inclusion across educational contexts (Norwich, 2022; Garrett, 2022). Such ambiguities may influence how teachers enact inclusive practices in their daily work. This study explores how kindergarten and early primary teachers working with children aged 5 to 8 years conceptualize inclusive education. Grounded in social representations theory (Abric, 2011) and contemporary perspectives on inclusive education (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2021), the study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach. Interviews were conducted with teachers working in kindergarten and the first years of primary school in Quebec, Canada. Preliminary analyses suggest that participants generally endorse inclusive values and recognize the importance of responding to children's diverse needs. However, variations emerge in how inclusion is understood, ranging from perspectives focused primarily on students with identified special educational needs to broader conceptions encompassing diversity, participation, equity, and belonging for all learners. Initial findings also point to the importance of collaboration, pedagogical flexibility, and access to professional support as key conditions for fostering inclusion. The study contributes to international discussions regarding the development of inclusive cultures and practices and offers insights for teacher education and professional development programs seeking to strengthen inclusive competencies.

Keywords:

inclusive education, social representations, kindergarten education, primary education, equity.