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## **Inclusion in Testing Times**

### *Implications for Citizenship and Participation*

Ydesen, Christian; Acosta, Felicitas; Milner, Alison Louise; Ruan, Youjin; Aderet-German, Tali Revital; Caride, Ezequiel Gomez; Hansen, Ida Spangsberg

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Background paper for the Futures of Education initiative

# Inclusion in testing times: implications for citizenship and participation

by Christian Ydesen<sup>1</sup>, Felicitas Acosta<sup>2</sup>, Alison L. Milner<sup>3</sup>, Youjin Ruan<sup>4</sup>, Tali Aderet-German<sup>5</sup>, Ezequiel Gomez Caride<sup>6</sup> and Ida Spangsberg Hansen<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Aalborg University, Denmark, <sup>2</sup>Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento, Argentina, <sup>3</sup>Aalborg University, Denmark, <sup>4</sup>Aalborg University, Denmark, <sup>5</sup>Aalborg University, Denmark, <sup>6</sup>Universidad de San Andrés, Argentina, <sup>7</sup>Aalborg University, Denmark

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## Abstract

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Testing and inclusion are two global education policy agendas with seemingly divergent aims. While inclusion suggests that every student can make a valuable contribution to their learning environment, testing has the capacity to exclude those who do not attain the 'right' knowledge in the 'right' way. National policies of testing and inclusion therefore have implications for students' participation in education and, implicitly, their future citizenship. Drawing on data from national-, regional- and school-level policy document analysis and qualitative interviews with policymakers, school leaders, teachers and students, this background paper explores the testing and inclusion agendas in five national contexts: Argentina, China, Denmark, England (UK) and Israel. It is argued that testing and inclusion, in the context of wider political, socio-economic, geographical and cultural forces, have combined to marginalise particular groups of students in each national jurisdiction. Moreover, the inclusion agenda is challenged by: i) the more dominant testing agenda; ii) limited engagement with broader conceptual understandings of inclusion; and iii) insufficient financial investment. Although the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated social and educational inequalities, students in certain contexts benefited from new approaches to learning. In light of the challenges and opportunities presented by the current health crisis, we conclude our paper with proposals for future policies of assessment and inclusion.

## Introduction

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Across the globe, education today takes place between two competing agendas: a testing agenda and an inclusion agenda. The global testing agenda is reflective of a growing trend which has placed students' learning outcomes and educational standards at the forefront of policymakers' attention (Addey et al., 2017; Hill & Kumar, 2009; Smith, 2016). In several national jurisdictions, test results serve as the basis for parents' school choices, school funding, performance rankings between students, teachers, and schools, and school leaders' and teachers' salary reviews. Additionally, in parallel with the rise of the testing agenda, a vast array of international large-scale assessment (ILSA) programmes has emerged, the most renowned being the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Pettersson et al., 2016). Although ILSAs have reframed education policies to be primarily concerned with the outcomes of these assessments (Grek, 2009; Sellar & Lingard, 2014), testing has often been promoted as a tool to objectively secure meritocracy, that is, to identify the appropriate educational trajectory for every individual (Ydesen, 2011).

Since 1994, when many countries ratified the Salamanca Statement on social and educational inclusion, efforts have been made to include all children in mainstream school systems and thus reduce the mechanisms of exclusion and the prominent role formerly ascribed to special needs education. This inclusive effort can be seen as linked to values of democracy and equality in society (Best et al., 2018). In contrast to the market principles of neoliberal globalisation, through which it is acceptable to have both winners and losers, the Salamanca Statement advocates universalism and international standards of social justice for *all* individuals. The Statement is closely connected to various United Nations resolutions which aim to ensure 'inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (United Nations Sustainable Development Goals). However, regardless of the great value often attributed to inclusion in education policies, it remains an extremely complex goal to achieve and is often side-lined in favour of other policy priorities (Engsig & Johnstone, 2015; Morton et al., 2013; Hardy & Woodcock, 2015).

This background paper addresses the paradoxes inherent to the implementation of these dual agendas and their implications for student participation and future citizenship. The paradoxes of testing and inclusion arise through their seemingly divergent educational aims (Hamre et al., 2018). In general, inclusion supports diversity and suggests that *everybody* can make a valuable contribution to their learning environment, and, implicitly, future societies (Best et al., 2018). By contrast, testing, with its capacity to differentiate, demarcate and deselect, implies that education and society are principally for those who can contribute the ‘right’ knowledge in the ‘right’ way (Stobart, 2008). Although considerable effort has gone into reconciling this schism, in terms of recommendations for policy and practice (Hegarty, 2020), the ambiguities remain. This is largely because testing is a very powerful technology which influences educational practice and decision-makers at all levels of education (Grek, 2020; Pereyra, 2011). Key to its influence are the wide range of accountability mechanisms employed by national governments, which tend to reinforce the principal uses of testing and thereby marginalise wider inclusion concerns (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2020). The production of numbers – and the accountability mechanisms within which they are embedded – constitutes certain power and truth regimes which influence decision makers’ and professionals’ perceptions and actions and shape student identities (Au, 2008; Bernstein, 1996). At stake is not a testing mechanism or an inclusion policy; rather, it is the definition of the other and the space we give to accept otherness, and thereby recognise, understand and celebrate differences, for instance, in culture or gender.

The paradoxes between testing and inclusion have been heightened further during the Covid-19 pandemic. Worldwide school closures and the shift to distance and digital learning have revealed significant educational inequities in society and, with widespread cancellation of standardised assessments, highlighted further the weaknesses in current models of student evaluation. But with an increased appreciation of the role of key workers in tackling this crisis, policymakers, practitioners and the general public have been forced to re-engage with questions on the purpose of public education and the nature of a ‘valuable’ societal contribution. Thus, the futures of education are more than ever intertwined with the future of our societies.

This paper draws on the individual analysis and comparative findings of five country case studies: Argentina, China, Denmark, England (UK) and Israel. For each case study, data have been generated from national-, regional- and school-level policy document analysis and qualitative interviews with civil servants, school leaders, teachers and student representatives. These data have been collected prior to and during the school closures and, in some cases, following the reopening of limited school services as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Since “futures must be locally and democratically envisioned”<sup>1</sup>, the background paper pays special attention to students’ and practitioners’ voices. In terms of the former, we have used the preliminary findings as the object of discussion, enabling the students to indicate the extent to which our analysis reflected their own experiences at the school level.

Building on this comparative research, this background paper: i) maps and analyses the challenges and opportunities of the testing and inclusion agendas in general but also as a result of the pandemic; ii) draws conclusions about the implications for student participation and future citizenship; and iii) presents suggestions for policy and practice with acknowledgement of the uncertainties, complexity and unpredictability of the world in which we live, and of the new technologies and multi-level governance structures intrinsic to current educational reform.

# Argentina

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## Testing

Argentina has a tradition of low-stakes assessments in education. Summative evaluations regulate pedagogical relationships and student promotion to the next grade but there is no final exam at the end of primary or secondary school and no entrance examination to university. However, in 1993, following policy orientations from the World Bank, Argentina implemented a national educational assessment infrastructure called ONE (Operativo Nacional de Educación) (Ascolani, 2008). Students take this standardised test in maths, Spanish, natural or social sciences and citizenship education in the final years of primary and secondary school. In 1997, the Ministry of Education published a list of school rankings based on the national standardised assessment results. This provoked considerable criticism from academics and education unions forcing the government to suspend publication of these school performance indicators in the future. Later, The National Educational Law (2006) brought about new approaches to standardised assessments. For example, the Law stated that the data (disaggregated results) from national standardised assessments should be confidential to avoid any form of stigmatisation (art. 97). In 2015, the government coalition (CAMBIEMOS) replaced ONE with a new national standardised assessment called *Aprender* [to learn]. Results are sent to school principals and provincial educational authorities for strategies of school improvement, however, there is a great deal of autonomy at the local level in how these results are used.

## Inclusion

Inclusion is the Cinderella concept in educational policy in Argentina (Gomez Caride & Cardoner, 2018). During the nation-building process, which started at the end of the nineteenth century, equality was translated as homogenisation through the education system (Dussel, 2004). The school had the republican mission of eliminating differences between the millions of immigrants that had arrived in Argentina from all over the world. In recent history, the polysemic meaning of inclusion as an educational policy is very telling. During the 80s, stakeholders focused their inclusion efforts on students with disabilities. In the course of the 90s, the principal approach to dealing with inclusion was through compensatory policies. Later, in the 2000s, the focus shifted to the extension of mandatory pre-school (Kinder) and high school (Grade 10-12) education. A milestone happened in 2009 with the implementation of the Universal Allocation Per Child, which significantly improved the high-school enrolment of low-income students (Edo et al., 2017). Under the mandate of the recent right-wing government (2015-2019), inclusion was again related to disability and policies oriented to embracing diversity. Currently, the centre-left administration prefers the term 'universalisation' which emphasises the responsibility of the state in providing a high-quality education.

## Paradoxes, challenges and opportunities in light of the pandemic

In Argentina, testing emerged as an antagonist principle of inclusion. However, the current pandemic has brought about new opportunities. In response to media pressure concerning promotion and grading at the beginning of the school closures, the Minister for Education stated: 'This is not a time for evaluations, it is a time for learning; evaluations will happen when we return to school'. Resultantly, the *Aprender* test was cancelled for this academic year. Instead, the government launched a national survey (Evaluación Nacional del Proceso de Continuidad Pedagógica) to evaluate the quality of processes of pedagogical continuity during the pandemic and to plan the return to school and the reorganisation of school activities. Formative assessment has been given a greater role in student evaluation and the end of term reports. Qualitative comments, rather than quantitative

grades, have been used in feedback on students' work. In a recent interview, a high school principal from an urban school described her understanding of evaluation 'as a new start' for the students.

COVID-19 has worsened the already fragile living conditions of families in Argentina. According to the latest United Nations analysis of COVID-19 in Argentina, 58.6 % of Argentine children will be in poverty at the end of 2020 (United Nations, 2020a). For that reason, schools have strengthened their social role. Around 80% of public schools are currently providing free meals to children. Although this is not the first time in recent history – the same situation occurred in 2001 as a result of the Argentine economic crisis – this new responsibility is challenging for teachers who see their conventional school roles disrupted. In terms of pedagogical continuity, recent studies show that 81% of students are doing some form of schoolwork at home (Ministerio de Educación Argentina & United Nations Children's Fund, 2020; United Nations Children's Fund, 2020). As a result of the shift to distance learning, the Minister for Education has launched an ambitious remote learning programme called *Seguimos Educando* [We Continue Educating] which includes a full range of online resources, videos, podcasts, lessons for students, parents, and teachers, and printed materials for students without Internet access. Finally, since 2006, there has been a national law that establishes mandatory sexual education in schools. However, implementation at the school level has been problematic for religious or economic reasons (Gertzman, 2018). During lockdown, the number of domestic violence incidents has grown by 39% according to the Ministry of Women, Genders and Diversity (United Nations, 2020b; Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020). Hence, the government has introduced several national educational initiatives to raise awareness of gender rights.

## China

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### Testing

Summative assessment is a key component of the Chinese education system (Berry, 2011). Students are assessed from the first year of compulsory education to the last year of high school and their grades are used to evaluate student, teacher and school performance. In addition, schools and parents often enrol students for further tests, such as the International Mathematical Olympiad and different language examinations, to increase their chances of admission to national and international universities. Homework and/or private tuition have been used by teachers and parents to improve students' scores in all tests. This demanding workload has increased student stress and suicide rates. Therefore, since the 1950s, the government has regularly formulated policies to guide departments, organisations, institutions, schools and teachers to reduce the academic burden on students (Wei & Qin, 2019; Zhang & Cheng, 2019). The measures include, for instance, reducing high-stakes end-of-term assessments in primary schools. However, in some schools, these tests simply take place under a different name to reduce their level of importance.

Since the 90s, *Gaokao* (National College Entrance Exam) and *Zhongkao* (Local High School Entrance Exam) have been a major focus of Chinese educational reforms. Government policymakers have sought to reduce the significance of these two high-stakes tests and move towards *suzhi jiaoyu* (quality education which focuses on developing well-rounded individuals) (Ministry of Education, 1999; Dello-Iacovo, 2009). However, the examination and enrolment reforms have only focused on content (Ministry of Education, 2002, 2008; State Council, 2014; Beijing Municipal Commission of Education, 2016, 2018). As such, the Chinese testing culture remains unchanged (Wang, 2016); it is still a common understanding in Chinese society that Gaokao can determine the future of an individual.

## Inclusion

Since the 90s, two key concepts have been used in the context of inclusive education in Chinese academic and policy literature in response to the Salamanca Statement: *quanna jiaoyu* and *ronghe jiaoyu*. The first of these includes an abbreviation of the Chinese phrase “all included” and the second means “to integrate, to merge, to mix” in Chinese. However, both of these concepts are rather new to many Chinese citizens, including the majority of participants in our study, and are often used interchangeably with special education in policy and research. In national policy texts, inclusion is often discussed indirectly under different educational terms, for example, ‘making the nine-year compulsory education universal’, ‘promoting educational equity’, and/or ‘promoting the balanced development of compulsory education’ (Ministry of Education, 1999, 2010; State Council, 2012, 2017; Xinhuashe, 2019). The dominant discourses have emphasised educational access to all school-age children regardless of their backgrounds. One main task of education policy is to include and improve the opportunities for children from rural areas, female children, children of minority ethnic groups, children from families with financial difficulties, migrant children (children of migrant workers who live in the cities) and children with disabilities (Yang, 2008).

As special education generally refers to inclusive education in the Chinese context, the ‘learning in regular classrooms’ (LRC) policy in the 80s is regarded as the first step towards the promotion of inclusion in China (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; An et al., 2018). The experiment started in the rural and remote areas of China where regular classrooms were often the only option for children with disabilities to have access to education (Deng & Su, 2012). However, special education outside mainstream education is also considered a form of inclusive education in China. Thus, in the last three decades, efforts have been made to promote access to basic education through the establishment of special schools, special classes, LRC programmes nationwide and systems of accountability, although the latter are still under development (Deng, 2004; Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012). Data from this study suggest that the common use of special schools for pupils with disabilities and high socio-economic segregation among schools have limited student diversity.

## Paradoxes, challenges and opportunities in light of the pandemic

The Chinese examination-oriented education system has been widely criticised due to its focus on rote learning and examination scores (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). One key issue for high-stakes tests (e.g. Gaokao) in China has been raised in both academic research and policy documents: the fairness of the test. There are large socio-economic gaps between urban and rural areas, which influence the quality of education, students’ results in Gaokao and, consequently, students’ opportunities to attend the higher-ranking universities. To improve the situation, the Chinese government has implemented a number of policy measures to promote equality and equity among students with diverse backgrounds. In recent years, the policy aim has been to improve access to higher education for migrant children and children from rural, remote and poor areas (State Council of China, 2014). Another important measure has been to standardise the examination and enrolment processes. Scholars agree with this approach but also acknowledge that a unified exam paper cannot reflect the diverse qualities of students and the selection criteria of universities (Ge, 2014; Bian, 2017).

There are several barriers to inclusive education (i.e. special education) in China: i) the persistence of elitism in the education system; ii) the implementation of policies without mandates; iii) uneven economic and social developments in urban and rural areas and; and iv) issues in teacher preparation (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; An et al., 2018). The persistence of elitism in the Chinese education system and the extremely exam-oriented system might have been the biggest challenge to reform efforts in inclusive education. Students’ unique needs are often neglected by teachers due to the pressure of exams (Wang & Wang, 2009; Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004).

During the pandemic, school closures have brought about new opportunities for the development of intelligent and varied forms of formative assessment (Zhong & Wang, 2020; Li, 2020; Fu & Zhou, 2020). However, they have also created great challenges for teachers, students and parents. Policy indicates that some schools have tried to maintain the same level of learning by putting ‘unnecessary pressure’ on the teachers and students (Ministry of Education & Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, 2020). Participants in our study noted that the pandemic had made educational inequalities even worse. For instance, there is a digital gap between students of different social backgrounds and from different regions (Zhong & Wang, 2020; Li, 2020; Fu & Zhou, 2020). Furthermore, many children in poor rural/remote areas, including ‘stay-at-home’ children (children of migrant workers who stay at home with other family members, for instance, grandparents), do not receive support from their families with the use of digital equipment for online learning. For example, some parents have refused to lend their mobile phones to their children, while grandparents do not know how to support the ‘stay-at-home’ children.

## Denmark

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### Testing

Historically, teachers in Denmark had considerable autonomy in the selection of evaluation tools for formative student assessment (Kamp, 2016; Kelly et al., 2018). However, the 80s and early 90s marked the start of a paradigm shift in Danish public education and, concomitantly, attempts by successive governments to control the content, mode and purpose of student assessment. Situated within a global neoliberal public reform agenda, systems of New Public Management led to an increase in state and municipal regulation, a goal/result-oriented form of governance and teacher accountability for – rather than autonomy over – evaluation and assessment (Carlgren & Klette, 2008; Kelly et al., 2018; Sørensen, 2011; Ydesen, 2013; Ydesen & Andreasen, 2014). Following disappointing results in the 2003 PISA survey (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2004a) and a 2004 OECD report (OECD, 2004b), which called for ‘an evaluation culture’, the Act 313 of 2006 made the pre-existing year 9 leaving examination mandatory and introduced national standardised tests at various stages of compulsory education (Sørensen, 2011), although these would not be fully implemented until 2010 (Hamre, 2018). Individualised, adaptive and computer-based, national tests are ostensibly more objective and comparable than other modes of assessment (Undervisningsministeriet, 2018a, 2018b). While purportedly low-stakes for students, teachers and their unions consider them a more stringent form of test-based accountability (Danmarks Lærereforening, 2020). Conversely, leaving examination results are more high stakes for students since they can determine future educational and employment destinations. Both assessments can be used to analyse student performance and/or progress in relation to their socio-economic background and other characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, parents’ educational background and special educational needs. Additionally, results contribute to school quality reports at the municipal level (Beuchert & Nandrup, 2017; Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2020).

### Inclusion

Educational values of democracy and equality have been a characteristic of the Danish education system since the post-war welfare state period (Hamre, 2018; Hansen, 2012; Kelly et al., 2014). However, despite the establishment of the *folkeskole*, the Danish ‘people’s school’ (Sørensen, 2011), managing diversity has proved problematic and students with complex needs have tended to be educated outside the comprehensive system



(Hamre, 2018; Ydesen, 2011; Ydesen et al., 2018). With the ratification of the Salamanca Statement 1994, Denmark indicated a desire to keep all children in mainstream education as much as possible. This was reinforced in the 2013 Public School Reform when the government set a goal to have 96% of all students in the Danish public school by 2015 (Engsig & Johnstone, 2015; Ydesen & Andreasen, 2020). However, for certain scholars, and revealing some alignment with the neoliberal testing agenda, inclusion has been legitimised as a means to improve academic performance and reduce educational expenditure (Hamre, 2018; Hansen, 2012). Although the inclusion goal was dropped in 2016, the Danish government continues to promote a broad understanding of inclusion which focuses on the academic achievement and wellbeing of *all* students (Ministry of Education, 2020). Most Danish research on inclusion focuses on the educational offer for students with special educational needs, defined as physical disabilities or behavioural disorders such as ADHD and autism (see Holst et al., 2000). In recent years, however, there has been increased empirical interest in the integration of migrant and refugee students (for instance, Egelund, Nielsen & Rangvid, 2011) whose mixed performance in the Danish education system has been noted at the European level (European Commission, 2019).

### **Paradoxes, challenges and opportunities in light of the pandemic**

In spring 2020, as a result of intense public and political debate, the government announced a review of the national tests. The Ministry for Children and Education has claimed that national tests are a fairer assessment of diverse student proficiencies and results could be used formatively to assist in teachers' differentiated planning. However, participants in this research study argued that the tests were stressful for students, especially those with special needs, while the test results had limited utility to teachers' professional practice and could be harmful to student wellbeing. During the pandemic, the year 9 leaving examination was cancelled which, according to the research participants, had no negative impact on students' outcomes. Indeed, teachers continued to provide feedback to their students via online platforms and were confident in their own assessment of students' attainment levels. As one teacher remarked: 'I don't necessarily need a tool or a test to assess whether they have learned anything...I use my own judgement'.

The Ministry of Children and Education has generally measured inclusion by students' access to mainstream education and girls have tended to have a higher inclusion level than boys. Paradoxically, the national inclusion level decreased from 95.1% to 94.7% between 2015/2016 and 2018/2019 (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2020). Conversely, the schools and municipalities in this study had a broader understanding of inclusion which incorporated concepts of community and wellbeing. However, at the municipal level, it was argued that lack of diversity was as much of a challenge for inclusion as diversity in Danish school populations. During the pandemic, participants claimed that some special educational needs students actually produced better work in the shift to online learning. However, younger students struggled more than older students with the use of digital technology. On their return to school, with social distancing measures in place, teachers were assigned to only one class. Special educational needs students benefited particularly from the structure and consistency of the new pedagogical approach and there were fewer behavioural issues. Teachers and their students were positive about the increased use of outdoor spaces for learning.

## England (UK)

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### Testing

Over a period of thirty years, high-stakes standardised tests have become an increasingly prominent feature of compulsory state school education in England (Kelly et al., 2018), driven by a wider standards agenda to improve student attainment and increase national competitiveness in a global economy (Ainscow et al., 2006). In 1988, under a Conservative government, the Education Reform Act introduced national curriculum assessments for students aged 7, 11 and 14 (later abolished) and a revised set of examinations for students aged 16: the General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) (Isaacs, 2010). Since the 90s, governments of the left and right have published assessment results in performance league tables to make schools more accountable to stakeholders and, in a competitive market, provide information to prospective parents (West et al., 2011). For GCSEs, schools were initially compared on the percentage of students achieving five good passes (A\*-C) including English and mathematics. However, in 2010, the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) was introduced to measure the percentage of students achieving a good pass in English, mathematics, science, a language and a humanity, shifting the focus from the standard of qualification to the type of knowledge deemed important for future learning and employment (Armitage & Lau, 2018). It was followed in 2016 by Progress 8, a new value-added measure, which compares the GCSE grades of students with similar prior attainment in primary national curriculum assessments (SATs) (Ingram et al., 2018). The Office for Standards in Education and Children's Services (Ofsted, 2018) considers such performance indicators in its school inspection grades. As GCSE results determine school leavers' opportunities, data are also collected on destinations, i.e. the percentage of students in employment, education or training (Department for Education [DfE], 2020a). Since the early 2000s, students have been able to study for technical and vocational qualifications alongside core GCSEs (see, for example, City and Guilds, 2020) but these do not always enable access to all post-compulsory education courses (Abrahams, 2018).

### Inclusion

Inclusion policy in England has focused on two key areas: special educational needs and disability (SEND) and socio-economic disadvantage (Evans & Lunt, 2010). For the former, the Warnock report (Warnock, 1978) has been highly influential in its advocacy of SEND students' inclusion in mainstream schools. Still, choice and diversity are integral to provision. While New Labour (1997-2010) signed up to the principles of the Salamanca Statement and advanced the Warnock recommendations through various educational and disability discrimination policies, *Every Child Matters* legislation and *Achievement for All*, an initiative aimed at reducing the SEN attainment gap through increased monitoring and assessment (see also Department for Education and Employment, 1997, 1998; Department for Education and Skills, 2004), special schools remained in the system (Ainscow et al., 2006; Norwich, 2014). More recently, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition (2010-2015) and current Conservative government (2015-) have sought to reverse the 'bias to inclusion' and reduce 'over-identification' of special needs. Promoting a user-led model and increased parental choice, a Green Paper (DfE, 2011) and a new Code of Practice on Special Educational Needs (Department for Education & Department of Health and Social Care, 2014) highlighted the need to raise levels of achievement and end a culture of low expectations (Norwich, 2014). However, a SEND funding deficit of £1.2 billion means provision often fails to meet demand (Local Government Association, 2020) and, in September 2019, the UK government launched a major review (DfE, 2019). Special educational needs, especially of a lower level, have been associated with socio-economic disadvantage (Shaw et al., 2016). Under the Coalition, *Pupil Premium* was implemented to provide additional funding to schools to improve the progress and attainment of poorer students (DfE, 2020b). However, it is argued that diversity of school type and selective admissions policies, alongside a fee-charging private school

sector, represent a greater risk to inclusion than diversity of student population (Gorard, 2014; Liu, Bessudnov, Black, & Norwich, 2020). Moreover, researchers have noted that state schools have few incentives to admit students who might adversely affect league table positions (Ainscow et al., 2006; Gorard, 2014). Recently, ‘off-rolling’ – the removal of students from the school roll without a formal, permanent exclusion – has become a concern (Long & Danechi, 2020).

### **Paradoxes, challenges and opportunities in light of Covid-19**

As schools sought to improve their performance in league tables, some were accused of ‘gaming the system’ through, for example, multiple subject entries via different examination boards (Baird et al., 2013; Ingram et al., 2018). Additionally, critics questioned the authenticity of students’ GCSE coursework (Barrance, 2019; Meadows & Black, 2018). Consequently, GCSEs have undergone considerable reform over the past decade. This has included a shift from modular to linear examinations, the removal of student coursework, more demanding subject content and a new grading scale from 9 (highest) to 1 (lowest). Participants in our study felt that these changes had had a particularly negative impact on SEND results; it was now considered a ‘less inclusive GCSE’.

During the pandemic, the 2020 GCSE examinations were cancelled. Additionally, the UK government announced that it would not publish any school performance data based on tests, assessments or examinations for 2020. Instead, schools submitted grades and rank ordered their students based on teachers’ professional judgment of expected attainment and a range of evidence including mock exams, non-examination assessment and homework. Examination boards then standardised these centre assessment grades (CAGs) using a statistical model developed by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) and devised from previous national results in the subject, students’ prior attainment compared to previous years, and individual schools’ results in recent years (Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation [Ofqual], 2020a). At the political level, concerns were raised over teacher bias and the potential impact of this system on the most disadvantaged learners (House of Commons Education Committee, 2020). Teachers in our study felt under pressure when required to assess students who had been taught for a terminal examination. Additional stress was caused by parental pressure, the late arrival of government guidance on avoiding unconscious bias and the possibility of students’ freedom of information requests on the process of assessment. Many students would have preferred to have taken the test. On 12 August 2020, the Secretary of State for Education announced a new ‘triple lock’ process; students could accept their calculated grade, appeal to receive a valid mock result or sit autumn exams (DfE, 2020c). However, on 17 August 2020, government policy changed again. Following public and political criticism of the algorithm used to calculate A level (post-secondary qualification) grades, which meant students from disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to receive lower grades, Ofqual announced that GCSE students would be awarded the CAG or the calculated grade, whichever was higher (Ofqual, 2020b).

The shift to online learning hit SEND and socio-economically disadvantaged students hardest. Although schools remained partially open, risk assessments prevented the attendance of certain SEND students. Some parents felt ‘utterly abandoned’ and noted the impact of no support on students’ physical and mental health, learning communications, emotions and behaviour. There were concerns that national catch-up plans did not mention SEND children. Some students from poorer socio-economic backgrounds had no access to computers, the internet or an appropriate learning environment (Disabled Children’s Partnership, 2020). Participants in our study noted that some students’ families struggled financially. To support them, schools bought students laptops, continued to provide free school meals, organised food voucher systems and delivered food and personal hygiene products to students’ homes. One school leader remarked that schools had done ‘the job of social services’.

# Israel

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## Testing

Since 1923, Israeli high-school students have been examined in several subjects as part of their matriculation exams (later named the *Bagrut*), a prerequisite for entry to higher education. Each year, the media use these data to highlight the best and worst-performing schools in the country. Over the years, the Ministry of Education has made several attempts to reduce the standardised element of these tests to allow for school-level internal assessment and project work. However, the majority of these tests remain external standardised exams. In 2005, the discourse on testing shifted following publication of the Dovrat report by the National Task Force for the Advancement of Education in Israel (National Task Force for the Advancement of the Education System, 2005), a government-appointed advisory group involving various educational stakeholders and headed by Israeli entrepreneur Shlomo Dovrat (Dahan & Yonah, 2005). Concerns were raised over the performance of Israeli students in PISA and recommendations were made on the use of evaluation data for school improvement. This introduced high-stakes standardised tests in primary schools, the *Meitzav*. In addition, the Dovrat report led to the introduction of the role of the school evaluation coordinator in primary and secondary schools, responsible for the implementation of internal evaluation and the interpretation of external evaluation data for school improvement (Levin-Rozalis & Lapidot, 2010).

The *Meitzav* evaluate the achievement of fifth and eighth grade students in mathematics, science and Arab/Hebrew and their data are used to rank schools' performance. These high-stakes tests were heavily criticised due to their adverse effects on teaching and learning processes in the classroom (e.g. Feniger et al., 2016; Klinger, 2009). Following this criticism, the Ministry of Education reiterated the importance of alternative assessment practices and encouraged their implementation in primary schools (Ministry of Education, 2014). In 2019, the Ministry initiated an evaluation reform that places greater emphasis on internal evaluation. The *Meitzav*, although terminated, will be replaced by another form of external examination.

## Inclusion

Israel has a diverse population comprised of Jews (approximately 74%), Muslim and Christian Arabs (21%) and other ethnicities and religions (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019a). Under the British Mandate for Palestine, Muslim and Jewish sectors of the population were granted separate autonomy in education. Following Israeli independence in 1948, these sectors continued to maintain their own schools and teacher education programmes under the centralised governance of the Israeli Ministry of Education (Ben-Peretz & Aderet-German 2016). The majority of the Jewish population consists of first, second and third generation immigrants (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013). The diverse Jewish religious orientations have led to several subsystems of public education: secular schools, religious schools and an ultraorthodox system funded by the state. Arab public schools are all secular. There are some marginal crossovers between the groups, but it is still not the norm (Shwed et al., 2014).

Despite great diversity in Israeli society, the term 'inclusion' in Hebrew is generally used in reference to the inclusion of special education students in mainstream schools. In policy documents and research literature, it is often used interchangeably with the Hebrew word for 'integration' (Gavish, 2017). In 1988, the Special Education Law was enacted and, in 2002, an inclusion section was added, giving priority to inclusion, rather than segregation according to the individual's needs, and allocating the services the system can offer these students. In 2017, as part of the new contract negotiated with the teachers' union, the Ministry of Education

created the role of the inclusive support teacher (IST). This teacher is responsible for implementing inclusive practices in their school and increasing organisational capacity to address students' disabilities (Gavish, 2017). In 2019, following the 2018 11th amendment to the Special Education Law, the Ministry began implementation through a pilot in one district and, in 2020, it was rolled out nationwide. This amendment promotes the inclusion of special education students in mainstream schools. However, it has been criticised as an attempt to reduce educational expenditure on special education provision (Education, Culture and Sports Committee, 2020).

### **Paradoxes, challenges and opportunities in light of the pandemic**

The Bagrut and Meitzav examinations have both been criticised due to the fact that student performance tends to be correlated with socio-economic status and geographical location (Angrist & Lavy, 2004). Indeed, the Ministry of Education has attempted to narrow the national social and educational gaps by integrating internal and external evaluations (National Task Force for the Advancement of the Education System, 2005; Nevo, 1995). During the pandemic, the Bagrut syllabi were reduced and many examinations were postponed; most examinations were moved from March-April to July 2020. As a result of school closures and disruption to routine learning schedules, the 2019 evaluation reform, which replaced the Meitzav, has not been fully implemented. The teacher participants in our study rarely mentioned the Meitzav but described a diverse range of assessment activities in their classroom. This could be explained by the government stance towards alternative modes of assessment in elementary schools (Ministry of Education, 2014) and the pandemic situation that necessitated a more individualised approach to the evaluation of student learning.

Despite ethnic and religious diversity and socio-economic disparities in Israel, the 11th amendment to the Special Education Law, called 'the inclusion reform' by school staff and parents, focuses only on children with diagnosed disabilities (Education, Culture and Sports Committee, 2020). In our study, teachers and principals had a broader definition of special educational needs and spoke about the lack of resources to help such students. Teachers talked about the difficulties they experienced in engaging the whole classroom in distance learning during school closures due to lack of computers and internet facilities in over two thirds of Israeli households (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019b). In March 2020, Nitzan Horovitz, Head of the Knesset's (Israel's parliament) Education, Culture, and Sports Committee, claimed that: 'The state is working in a very limited way to respond to the issue of students from different populations' (Tversky, 2020). He called for a solution to the lack of technological facilities in students' homes that enable distance learning.

Teachers in our study felt limited in the range of inclusion practices they could adopt in their classrooms and believed they needed more pedagogical freedom to attend to their students' diverse needs. Similarly, principals reported feeling limited in resource distribution because of the centralised mechanism of the Ministry of Education. Practitioners also highlighted the problem of large class sizes. This resource dilemma has been at the centre of many debates in Israel (Shafir et al., 2016) and was underlined by participants as a major reason for teachers' inability to attend to every student's needs. When defining these needs, teachers mainly talked about students' disabilities. However, teachers in Arab and Jewish schools of lower socio-economic status adopted a more holistic view of students' needs incorporating families' economic difficulties.

## **Conclusion**

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Analysis of the paradoxes arising between testing and inclusion discourses and practices across the five cases presents some interesting insights with relevance for student participation and future citizenship. All five cases

contain examples of ambiguities and tensions between the testing and inclusion agendas. In England, testing and inclusion prove hard to reconcile because of the high-stakes accountability system which operates in a competitive school market. For schools, this creates fear of sanctions or diminished reputation, if they do not meet the narrowly defined national standards. Consequently, some students are deemed more 'problematic' than others in terms of the teaching resources required and their potential impact on school results. This can lead to their exclusion from tests or school – including initial admission – more generally. In the Argentine case, we see a highly politicised and explicit positioning of standardised testing and learning as being antagonistic. But the antagonism is also visible in the correlation between test results and socio-economic status and geographical location. The case of Israel, although connoted by different cultural traditions, is inscribed in this same dynamic: seemingly objective and fair test practices work for the reproduction of social inequalities. In China, testing remains the key component of the education system. The highly standardised examination and enrolment processes of high-stakes tests, together with factors such as the widespread use of special schools and the high socio-economic segregation among schools, have been detrimental to student diversity. However, we also see clear indications that policies promoting equality and equity can operate in a very high-stakes assessment system due to the large socio-economic gaps between urban and rural areas. In Denmark, standardised tests are noted to be particularly harmful to certain student groups, not only in terms of examination stress but also their academic self-image and more general feelings of self-worth. This point was confirmed in our student interviews.

Our analysis shows that testing and inclusion cannot be treated as two separate spheres. Moreover, they take place within an even wider educational policy context with numerous other agendas and concerns. The educational practices navigating the field of tension between testing and inclusion inevitably have spill-over effects on the horizon of actions for all stakeholders. In this sense, rather than two competing agendas, we could define them as two complementary agendas, with layers of intersection and reciprocal influences both at the level of policies and schooling practices. In each context, these agendas work together to define the 'good' student and therefore the 'good' citizen in terms of their future contribution to the labour market and wider society.

A remarkable observation, which cuts across all five case studies, is that special education is often used interchangeably with inclusive education. According to Slee (2018), 'special education provides the instrumentation for the calibration, separation and training of so-called defective children' (p. 22). Slee's argument reminds us that inclusion can be understood in two fundamentally different ways: i) a deficiency and defectiveness approach and ii) a contextual, processual and barrier dismantling approach. The latter is in congruence with the definition of inclusion used in the 2020 GEM report. The defining question in distinguishing these two interpretations is: 'who must change?'. Is it the child/parents or is it the learning context? This same question can be posed in the case of testing. Is it students and teachers who must adapt to the standardised assessment format, and the standardised curricula from which this emerges, or could variable forms of evaluation give rise to variability in approaches to teaching and learning? Although defined in a binary way here, navigating these questions constructively requires space to create innovative and adaptive solutions for inclusive schooling.

Given the distinctions between the cases, the creation of such solutions is dependent on cultural context, as defined by the prevalent interpretations of testing and inclusion, the (low/high) stakes involved in testing and inclusion practices, and the stakeholders involved. However, material conditions are equally significant. Data from our student interviews suggest that the creation of inclusive educational cultures requires the involvement of all stakeholders, not least the students themselves. They also reveal that test and examination results, once introduced in education, take on a towering importance relative to other priorities. The aforementioned points

became even more apparent as policymakers and practitioners in the case countries responded to various educational dilemmas during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In all the cases, the pandemic has caused considerable challenges for teachers and students. In particular, the transition to online teaching and learning, with students' unequal access to technology, and variance in school attendance and/or access to learning during lockdown and on return to the classroom have reinforced and sometimes aggravated the digital gap and wider social inequalities. In terms of assessment, different solutions have been found with considerable impact on the conditions of inclusive schooling. Generally, the pandemic has fertilized a more explorative environment for assessment practices, leaving a greater role for formative types of assessment. In some cases, this has created accountability issues, for instance, when new emergency legislation does not recognise SEND students' needs or teacher assessment becomes more significant in determining students' examination grades (England), or aggravated issues of insufficient funding to sustain students in need (Israel).

But the pandemic has also brought about new opportunities. In the Danish case, outdoor teaching, smaller class sizes, better use of school space and a reduction in teacher movement between classes have created some positive experiences for students and teachers. Such practices inevitably depend on the measures adopted in any policy response to Covid-19 in general and the national funding situation in particular. In the Argentine case, students appreciated the amount of freedom they gained from online learning to choose their own pace of working. They emphasised that, throughout the school closure, they were able to develop skills such as autonomy, organization and responsibility.

Regardless of context, the pandemic offers the opportunity to review current models of schooling, especially those that hinder the achievement of equivalent trajectories for all children and young people. This requires more than access to socially relevant content which promotes commonality of educational experience; rather, it is about the right to be recognised for our differences both in school and wider society.

One way to advance such recognition lies in strengthening student participation in order to promote citizenship. In terms of educational policies, our research suggests it is important to:

- Consider the latitude of school leaders and teachers (360 degree) to find viable and adaptive solutions for balancing assessment and inclusion;
- Launch initiatives which focus on school culture involving public officials, head teachers, teachers, other professionals, parents and students in order to promote the values and practices of inclusive education;
- Create space for human diversity, in terms of flexible assessment practices which promote positive outcomes and recognition of students' diverse skills and educational achievements;
- Question the purposes of testing and concomitant accountability measures considering policy goals towards inclusive schooling;
- Consider the tools, instruments and necessary degree of standardisation used for assessment purposes;
- Consider the organisation of the education system (including its culture, values, and consequences attached to assessment practices) and, particularly, its approaches to quality assurance and the degree of professional control over and trust in teacher-led assessment; and,
- Review resource allocation and teacher training in light of positive experiences sparked by the Covid-19 pandemic.

These recommendations could also serve for a vision for the futures of education.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Statement by President Sahle-Work Zewde during the official launching of Futures of Education Global Initiative, 2019.

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