The role of the school in tackling the exclusion of students within the framework of inclusive education: a perspective from critical realism

O papel da escola no combate à exclusão de estudantes no âmbito da educação inclusiva: perspectiva do realismo crítico

El papel de la escuela en el combate a la exclusión de estudiantes en el ámbito de la educación inclusiva: perspectiva del realismo crítico

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that the critical realist idea of open *versus* closed systems provide a framework for theorising the contested relationship between the school vs. society in tackling the exclusion of students, within the framework of inclusive education. Data collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers, as part of a PhD thesis, are used to examine if the school is an open or closed system and how this affects the exclusion of students. In particular, teachers' views, working at two highly diverse schools in Cyprus, are used, to shed light on the relationship between students' disadvantage, in terms of their immigrant and low socio-economic background, and their exclusion, in terms of their academic achievement at the school. Further, teachers' views are used to examine if through its functioning the school responds to students' disadvantaged circumstances. This research suggests that the school cannot tackle students' exclusion because, even though it is an open system, it operates as a closed system.
Keywords: Open and closed systems, inclusive education, poor ethnic minority students

Resumo

Neste artigo argumento que a ideia do realismo crítico de sistemas abertos *vs* sistemas fechados fornecem um quadro para teorizar a relação controvertida entre a escola e a sociedade, na luta contra a exclusão de alunos no âmbito da educação inclusiva. Os dados coletados, por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas com os professores, fazem parte de uma tese de doutoramento, usados para examinar se a escola é um sistema aberto ou fechado e como isso afeta a exclusão dos alunos. Em particular, os pontos de vistas dos professores que trabalham em duas escolas diversas, em Ciprus, são utilizados para lançar luz sobre a relação entre alunos que estão em desvantagem, por serem imigrantes e de baixa condição socioeconômica, e a sua exclusão em termos de seu desenvolvimento na escola. Além disso, os pontos de vista dos professores são usados para examinar se, através do seu funcionamento, a escola atende os estudantes desfavorecidos. Esta pesquisa sugere que a escola não pode combater a exclusão dos alunos porque, apesar de ser um sistema aberto, funciona como um sistema fechado.
Palavras-Chave: Sistemas abertos e fechados, educação inclusiva, estudantes pobres de minorias étnicas

Resumen

En este artículo, argumento que la idea del realismo crítico de sistemas abiertos y sistemas cerrados proveen un cuadro para teorizar la relación controvertida entre la escuela y la sociedad, en la lucha contra la exclusión de alumnos en el ámbito de la educación inclusiva. Los datos recogidos, por medio de entrevistas semiestructuradas con los profesores, forman parte de una tesis de doctorado, usados para examinar si la escuela es un sistema abierto o cerrado y como eso afecta la exclusión de los alumnos. En particular, se utilizan los puntos de vista de los profesores que trabajan en dos escuelas diversas, en Ciprus, para lanzar luz a la relación entre alumnos que están en desventaja, por ser inmigrantes y de baja condición socioeconómica, y a su exclusión en términos de su desarrollo en la escuela. Además, se usan los puntos de vista de los profesores para examinar si a través de su funcionamiento la escuela atiende a los estudiantes desfavorecidos. Esta investigación sugiere que la escuela no puede combatir la exclusión de los alumnos porque, a pesar de ser un sistema abierto, funciona como un sistema cerrado.
Palabras Clave: Sistemas abiertos y cerrados, educación inclusiva, estudiantes pobres de minorías étnicas

Introduction

The abandonment of the notion of students' integration and the adoption of the notion of inclusive education shifted the emphasis from viewing students' difficulties as rooted within the individual to transforming the school as a whole (UNESCO, 2009a). Restructuring the school concerns such things as changing teachers' training, giving extra resources and providing a differentiated curriculum in order to meet the needs of *all* students in the mainstream classroom. Changes are expected to have a positive impact in the education of students, reduce their exclusion from the social and academic life and, potentially increase their inclusion. There are, however, some theorists, who emphasize that the school not only does not tackle the exclusion of students, but rather it reproduces and reinforces it (e.g. SLEE, 2012).

In this paper, I look at teachers' perspectives concerning the role of the school in tackling the exclusion of students, as it is set in the framework of inclusive education. Teachers' perspectives are important to be reported concerning this issue, because their role is considered centripetal in tackling the exclusion and fostering the inclusion of students. Their perceptions can illuminate normalized and taken-for-granted assumptions about the role of the school and be used to shed light on possible shortcomings or contradiction, which may exist in society, affecting the school (MESHULAM AND APPLE, 2014; MUNN AND LLOYD, 2005).

To better uncover the role of the school in the exclusion of students, especially in relation to vulnerable groups, I make use of the critical realist notion of *open and closed systems.* According to the founder of the critical realism, Roy Bhaskar, this differentiation helps transcend reductionist explanations with regards to how social phenomena function (BHASKAR, 1998). I wish to suggest, that by theorising the way schools function, a better understanding of its ambiguous role concerning the exclusion of students is going to be reached and hence, alternative theories and practices will be developed which could help more students to be successfully included.

In the following sections, I begin with an overview of what is coined as inclusive education nowadays and how it historically developed from the notion of integration. Then, I explain how the role of the school is approached by different theorists in the inclusive education discourse, particularly in relation to the notion of exclusion, before I turn to present the critical realist notions of the open and closed systems and how these relate to school. I give a description of the methodology and then I discuss some quotes from the interviews with teachers working in two highly diverse schools, offering some concluding remarks.

1. Inclusive education

Inclusive education pertains to accepting and celebrating learners' diversity in terms of their differences. Differences may refer to such things as ability, ethnic origin, religion, sexual orientation, race, economic class etc. (UNESCO, 2009b). In the core of inclusive education is a care for catering for and addressing the individual and diverse needs of all students and increasing their participation in 'learning, cultures and communities' so that to tackle their educational as well as their social exclusion (UNESCO, 2009a).

Historically, inclusive education has been a descendant of the notion of integration, as it was proposed for the first time in the famous Warnock report (WARNOCK, 1978). Mary Warnock has criticized the placement of 'children with special needs' to segregated settings for being an exclusionary practice. Instead, she argued for their integration in mainstream schools, where a special educational needs (SEN) provision should be offered, along with their peers. Thus, integration came to contradict the notion of segregation (Norwich, 2012) and related to attempts to overcome children's physical marginalization. Despite the fact that integration has been a move towards including students in the mainstream classroom, it has been particularly criticized, for disregarding the differences of people and for tending, instead, to assume that children should be acculturated and assimilated into an already existing, stable and fixated educational system. Thus, by overcoming children's physical exclusion from schools did not necessarily omit their social or academic exclusion (SLEE, 2011; SLEE 2012).

Inclusion on the other hand came to accept and celebrate students' differences, having a broader reference concerning diversity (e.g. gender, ethnicity, etc.) (NORWICH, 2012). To use Corbett's metaphor: 'Whilst integration was the square peg struggling to fit the round holes, inclusion is a circle containing many different shapes and sizes, all interrelating into the whole [...] (CORBETT AND SLEE, 2000, p. 140). What came to be identified as the chief difference between integration and inclusion pertained to the need for changing and transforming both the school as well as the wider educational and social systems in order to meet children's needs. The restructuring of the school regarded modifications of a variety of things, including content, approaches, and strategies (UNESCO, n.d.). Indeed, modification attempts have been tacitly directed from the fact that inclusion

inherently carries the following meanings: the refusal of the belief that some children are uneducable and should be left behind, the transcendence of the categorization of children (e.g. children with special needs, poor children, ethnic minority children etc.), and the accommodation of the needs of all children.

School vs. society in inclusive education

Theorists from the field of inclusive education perceived the role of the school as very important for contributing to the inclusion of people in society and the creation of a fair world (AINSCOW, BOOTH AND DYSON, 2006; RYAN, 2006). The idea that education and the school as an institution should address social matters, such as social justice and social cohesion (UNESCO, 2009a) and act as a path for tackling exclusion in society is not new, since it has been used during 1960's (EDWARDS, GREEN AND LYONS, 2002) and it is still under emphasis (APPLE, 2015). In particular, the school as an institution is perceived as a centripetal force for dealing and addressing social matters like social justice and social cohesion (UNESCO, 2009a). The main idea is that through radical transformation of the school as a whole school approach (ALLAN, 2005; UNESCO, 2009b) the marginalization of students and then people in society, will be tackled. Admittedly, schooling is also perceived as a means for escaping from the route of poverty and engaging in better life opportunities. That is why families put so much emphasis on educating their children (MURRAY, 2012).

Nonetheless, there are those who are reluctant to accept that education can compensate for society's injustices (BERNSTEIN, 1970; EDWARDS, GREEN AND LYONS, 2002; FREIRE, 1970), let alone change society to a fairer place. For instance, some researchers argue that, even though attempts in the form of small scale reforms may tend to take place to compensate for inequalities, in school, they may render it impossible to sustain a consistency for the restructuring of society, in terms of enabling the continuation of the participation of students as adults (e.g. through employment opportunities) in the societal level (ARMSTRONG, 1999). It is also argued, that, even nowadays, despite attempts for restructuring, schools constitute places of exclusion. Slee (2011) argues that the 'regular' or the 'normal' school, may still be a dreadful experience for students, who are either disabled or poor or of colour or refugees or travelers or Aboriginals. Departing from the same point, other authors accentuate that poor and coloured children are the victims and the recipients of failing schools, unprepared teachers, low resources and inequitable learning procedures (GAUSE, 2011).

Moreover, it has been argued that students' unequal trajectories, especially pertaining to race and family income, shape their achievement at schools (REARDON, 2011). The social and cultural reproduction models, focus on the way that schools reproduce 'an unequal society by socializing students to take and accept their place in society' (BUSTILLOS AND SOLORZANO, 2012, p.1855). In particular, what has been underscored in these theories concerned the mirroring of the rules, values, norms and skills of a capitalist workplace in the classroom encounter, what came to be name as the correspondence principle (BOWLS AND GINTIS, 2011). The school, by promoting certain values and forms

of knowledge and speaking, which tend to privilege dominant classes, reproduces their dominance, while by marginalizing others which are characteristic of subordinate groups or classes, it reproduces their subordinance.

Munn and Loyd (2005) argue that to be able to explore students' exclusion, one should define its nature and extend. They suggest that the exclusion of students from the school should take into account the following three elements: relativity, agency and dynamics. Relativity suggests that the exclusion of students from school is judged based on others' circumstances, e.g. boys, poor and students with special needs experience more exclusion than other groups. Agency concerns the identification of the source of exclusion, e.g. individual's behaviours or school's rules. The dynamics of exclusion, which is pertinent to this research, shifts the emphasis from the policy and practices applied at the school, to the set of disadvantaged students' circumstances, e.g. adverse home conditions, which hinder their academic achievement, their employment ambitions and their social mobility, amongst others. Further, even though there are different forms and levels of exclusion, e.g. social exclusion, for reasons of practicality, in this paper, the notion is going to be approached as the low academic achievement of students.

In the following section, I present the idea of open systems, as developed by critical realists, and I draw links with the notion of the school.

2. Critical realism: open versus closed systems

Transcending the idea, typically based on Hume's theory of causal laws, which embodied the assumption that the world is flat (it has got no structure), undifferentiated and unchanging (repetitive), critical realism's new ontology suggests that the world is stratified, differentiated and changing. The main index of ontological differentiation turns on the distinction between open and closed systems while the main index of ontological stratification is the distinction between the real and the actual. In this paper, I will focus on the differentiation between closed and open systems and relate it to the field of education.

In the closed system, the scientist triggers and activates the mechanism he investigates and, second s/he prevents interferences of other mechanisms with the mechanism under study, for such interferences would not allow a unique relationship or description of the operation of the mechanism under study (BHASKAR ET AL, 2010). The notion of the closed system is used, for example, in experiments conducted in laboratories, where different variables are controlled and others are tested against a specific hypothesis.

Bhaskar argues for the open systemic character of all social phenomena (BHASKAR, 1998). Open systemic phenomena are generated and explained by a multiplicity of mechanisms and structures (BHASKAR ET AL, 2010), i.e. social events must be seen as 'conjunctures' and social things as 'compounds' (BHASKAR, 2009). In particular, a system pertains to a combination of structures while a nexus pertains to a combination of an event's aspects. The critical realist idea of the open systems have been used in different disciplines and fields, such as economics (e.g. MEARMAN, 2006; BIGO, 2006), education (EGBO, 2005; BROWN, 2009) and,

gender studies (PRICE, 2014). Other widely used model or heuristic device which accentuate the use of multiple mechanisms for the explanation of social phenomena include the socio-economic-bio-physical model used by the World Health Organisation for different subjects, e.g. research disability and inclusive education etc.

Being anchored in critical realism ontology, Brown (2009) wrote the article 'The ontological turn in education' where he argued that learning environments are open systems[1]. To put it in his own words:

> Learning environments are open systems, not in the weak sense of having porous borders (which they do), but in the strong sense of responding to both internal and external factors, and morphogenetically changing over time as a result (BROWN, 2009, p.19).

The openness of the school suggests that there are a number of reasons both within and outside the school which interact with regards to students' learning. Following the same stream of thought, the environment of the school respond, to use Brown's exact word, to internal and external factors, causing the inclusion or the exclusion of students. This idea is not exactly new, since other theorists argued about the interaction of different levels of reality for explaining a phenomenon. For instance, Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem theory (1979) suggests that the individual interacts with five environmental systems, namely microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. The microsystem refers to institutions that directly affect the child, e.g. family and school. The mesosystem foregrounds that there are relationships between microsystems, e.g. between families and schools. The exosystem refers to links in systems that are not directly related to the child, e.g. parents' influence by other parents at work, The macrosystem describes the particular culture which a student and his family find themselves in, for example in terms of ethnicity and values. The chronosystem relates to the socio-historical as well as transitional circumstances, which might affect a student, e.g. parents' divorce.

What critical realism offers to the discussion about the role of the school in the inclusion/exclusion of students is not so much the idea about the school as an open system, but rather the idea of the school as a closed system. Brown, provided several examples to illustrate that educational systems worldwide perceive learning environments as closed systems. For instance, he called attention to the fact that educational systems are concerned with control. This is illustrated through decisions about such things as uniforms, a centralized curriculum and setting boundaries within the school as well as between the school and society. The target is to offer the same things, such as curriculum and resources to all, by isolating the school from the wider socio-cultural environment and thus, 'equalize' opportunities at the school level. As he stresses (2009, p.18):

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1   Brown (2009) developed a model for learning environments, consisting of a set of other elements, besides the open and closed system.

Attempts at control in educational settings are attempts to control events. The ideal is to produce events-students behaviours and learning outcomes-reliably. One rationale for this ideal is to provide equitable learning outcomes between schools, teachers and students from different backgrounds, in short, between variables.

Of course, by foregrounding the idea of the closeness of the school system, critical realism helps to explore a phenomenon, by investigating if it shares certain characteristics which indicate that it operates an a closed system. Further, the closed system is opposed to the idea of the school as an open system. What I mean, is that even if the idea of the closeness and the openness of the school could be serve independently as heuristic devices, i.e. to identify aspects of the closed and open systems, they can also help investigate an issue under the rubric of the interconnectness of the two systems. Brown, for instance, argues, that the fact that not all students perform in the same way, casts doubt on the idea of the closeness of the school system. Further, he suggests that the emphasis placed on schools, teachers and parents concerning the provision of additional/ differentiated help to students in order to meet the curriculum needs illustrates the openness of the school system. Also, by taking into account both the idea of the closed and open systems, Brown argues that the mismatch between the curriculum content and the experiences of students indicates that schools are situated in wider contexts.

3. Methodology

The research objective was to disambiguate the role of the school vs. society, in tackling the exclusion of students, within the context of inclusive education. Towards this end, I examined if the school was a closed or open system. Data were yielded from ten semi-structured interviews with teachers working at two urban highly diverse schools, consisting of a vast majority of poor, ethnic minority students. Teachers answered in questions concerning students' personal circumstances in terms of ethnic and socio-economic background and whether these affected their learning at the school. Further, they provided insights on the way the schools operated in terms of such things as the curriculum and rules. My choice of a qualitative study allowed the investigation of complex phenomena in the context they occur (BAXTER AND JACK, 2008). However, this study was not concerned with comparing teachers' comments in the two schools, but rather uses them to shed light to the role of the school in the inclusion/exclusion of students, within the framework of inclusive education.

Taking into account that the distinctive features of a case are important in order to gain essential information (DESCOMBE, 2003), I used purposeful sampling to select the school site and the participants. This kind of sampling is grounded in the careful and deliberate selection on the part of the researcher as to what, where and whom to study (CHMILIAR, 2009). To gather information with regards to the criteria of the socio-

economic background of the school, I asked for recommendations from key informants (MILES AND HUBERMAN, 1994) to whom I had access. Furthermore, I contacted former teacher colleagues and their friends who had been working at different schools in Cyprus. Drawing information from key informants was necessary because there were not any official external criteria or reports with regards to the above criteria (e.g. Offsted reports), which would indicate the characteristics of the school. I arranged to conduct semi-structured interviews with teachers during non-teaching periods in empty classrooms. This type of interview is appropriate in the sense that it is 'open to following the leads of informants and probing into areas that arise during interview interactions' (HATCH, 2002, p. 94). Interviews extended from almost a 45-minute period to a course of an hour and a half. All participants were interviewed individually and no one else was allowed to be present during interviews. NViVo qualitative data analysis software, has been a helpful tool in the process of the thematic analysis (MAXWELL, 2012) I undertook. It supported me to deal with the complexity and wealth of qualitative data, through organizing the data and seeing relationships between them by drawing models (CRESWELL AND MILLER, 2000). However, in the analysis process as well as in all other phases of the qualitative research, the main tool has been the researcher herself.

4. Are schools open or closed systems?

In this section I report teachers' views on whether students' disadvantaged circumstances, i.e. poverty and ethnic minority background, affected their exclusion, in terms of their academic achievement, at the level of the school. Further, I provide teachers' comments on how the school responds to the disadvantage of students. My attempt is to examine if the school is an open system, i.e. affected by society or a closed system, i.e. not affected by society.

Teachers at the two schools suggested that the majority of their students were on the breadline and that parents were mostly concerned with meeting the family's basic needs, such as having enough food and clothes. To put it in a teacher's own words: *'parents would rather feed and clothe their children and themselves rather than spend money on their children's education; it makes sense, doesn't' it?'* Additionally, teachers emphasized that the majority of parents were unable to support students' learning at home, due to lack of money and time. For instance, parents could not afford to pay tutoring lessons for providing extra support, even though additional help was quite important for students because they did not speak the instruction language, i.e. Greek. According to a teacher: *'Perhaps parents may want to help their children but they are not in the position because they work until late at night and they have to think about where they will find the money to pay the rent'.* The first grade teacher also added that, if parents helped their students from the outset, perhaps they would not have fallen behind later on. Besides the lack of material resources, teachers suggested that parents in Karma school lacked also the

time to help their children because they were not physically at home or they worked until late at night. The vast majority of parents were unskilled labour workers who had to work until very late at night in order to earn a living, even though this was not enough for meeting their basic needs. According to a teacher: *'most parents are employees in stores and work until late, until 6:30 or 7:00 o' clock or even later; they work at bakeries, do gardening or clean houses'*. Moreover, teachers said that, students had limited experiences compared to other students in other schools, e.g. travelling abroad, due to their parents' economic deprivation: *'travelling abroad or going skiing is a dream for our students'* while they also emphasized that students were going through very stressful situations at home, e.g. divorces and alcoholism. Children attending Karma school had been going through very stressful situations at home, pertaining to alcoholism or divorces among parents: *'students in this school suffer from social plus economic problems and in turn parents have problems with divorces and alcoholism'.*

According to teachers, students' social, economic and cultural problems, amongst other things, led to a lack of interest and engagement at school. As a teacher comments: *'Students in general are very bored and there is a very low level of engagement to the lesson. This may be due to the fact that they do not understand the lesson'.* Another one said: *'Most of the children do not have their handouts with them, thus they are not able to follow the lesson'.* Teachers had to deal with low academic achievements on the part of the students. For example, students' workbooks had only a few written works and these were of a very poor quality and not up to the standards for the particular grade in terms of spelling and grammar, based on the curriculum goals: *'The academic level is very low in this school'.* Moreover, teachers could not control the numerous discipline problems raised by the misbehaviour of students. According to a teacher: *'No one can control them: not me, not the school, not their parents, not the principal'.*

With regards to how the school functioned in terms of issues, such as the curriculum and rules, teachers uncovered that the two schools had no control over decisions about staff allocation, rules, curriculum and reading materials. Instead, they functioned in the same way, as any other school unit in Cyprus. Teachers disclaimed that they had to teach the content of a centrally determined curriculum: *'we function in the same way as all schools in Cyprus; we have to teach the content of the curriculum, despite students' differences'.* The curriculum informed educational practice since it included the broad goals for education, e.g. the creation of a democratic and humane school. Teaching and assessment procedures were in Greek, despite that fact that the majority of students were non-native speakers: *'Of course, our tests are in Greek'.* Further, any additional material, e.g. handouts, movies, songs were in Greek. Both schools seemed to be regulated by the same rules which were determined centrally by the Ministry of Education Officials. According to a teacher:

> all children are obliged to wear the same uniform. The timetable is the same for all: children have specific teaching and break times while the head teachers and teachers have a certain amount of teaching and non-teaching periods according to the years of service.

5. Are schools open systems, functioning as closed systems?

In this section I argue that teachers' views shed light to schools as being open systems, functioning as closed systems. The open systemic character of the school was illustrated by the fact that the exclusion of students pre-existed schooling due to the wider socio-economic and cultural circumstances they found themselves in. Poor students from ethnic backgrounds found themselves from the outset in a double disadvantaged position compared to their native peers. One aspect of their disadvantage related to their immigrant status and the other to the economic coupled with educational lack of their parents (OECD, 2009, p. 7). This may reside to the fact that people who migrate are already vulnerable and have low education in their own country. From this perspective, ethnic minorities may experience higher levels of poverty and generally be more vulnerable than the native groups of people who are poor. According to a European network of experts:

> The bulk of labour migrants, refugees and other migrant groups who have come to Europe after World War II with their families are people with a mostly rural background from less developed countries and little education [...]. Many immigrants belong to the low income and vulnerable groups in their new societies (NESSE, 2008, p. 44).

Students seemed to belong to 'exclusion' categories, because of their families' circumstances, e.g. unemployment, before they entered school. These circumstances affected school due to its open systemic character. For instance, parents of students from disadvantaged backgrounds were *'less involved in their children's schooling for a variety of economic and social reasons'* (BREAKSPEAR, 2012, p. 6). The impact of the wider societal structures at the school, have been also documented in the case of India, where poverty urged parents to discontinue the education of their younger children in order to be able to retain their older children at school (NAMBISSAN, 2014). Further, experiencing ill health, malnutrition and violence or insecurity in their lives affected their school life. One could argue, at this point, that Berstein's (1970) question of whether the school can compensate for society could be changed to whether society can compensate for the school.

At the same time, the number of internal controlling attempts, such as a given curriculum, uniforms, certain rules and processes illustrated that the school functioned as a closed system. As Brown (2009, p.20) maintains:*'Centralised curriculum development, assessment and resourcing of schools, including staffing, is also premised on an assumption that teachers and schools can create and maintain systems that are sufficiently closed to operate despite adverse environmental factors'.* The operation of schools as closed systems seemed to have left students' disadvantaged starting point, as described by teachers, largely un-addressed. Attention was diverted from the broader economic and social framework that students found themselves in as well as the wider societal structures, which may have included or excluded students from the outset (MUNN AND LOYD, 2005). Labonte (2004, p.117) however, succinctly poses the following question:

But are there risks in pursuing policies and programs that assume a priori that income redistribution and human rights are solidly in place, when most of the evidence for much of the world is that they are not?

Further, the structures of society did not allow students to be included in the school because membership to specific 'inclusion' categories, e.g. have money and support, was out of the sphere of students' control (MACFARLANE, 2010). Instead, students already suffering from poverty because of their families' socio-economic situation, seemed to experience exclusion disproportionately at school (Munn and Lloyd, 2005) in relation to other students whose families had resources. For instance, students had limited experiences because their parents could not afford it. Labonte (2004, p.115) again wonders: '[...] *how can one 'include' people and groups into structured systems that systematically 'excluded' them in the first place?'*. It seems that the schools judge the student only in terms of their normalcy to adjust to a set of 'controlled variables' at the school, e.g. their knowledge in the instruction language, their previous learning and their ability to achieve.

Drawing from the above, schools seemed to have a limit to what they could do to compensate for the effects of society, e.g. poverty (VAN DE BERG, 2008). This could be explained by the fact that the school is an open system, operating as a closed one. In other words, while the academic achievement of students is being affected by wider socio-economic factors, the school functions as if though, these differences, which *a priori* disadvantage and exclude students, do not exist. If schools continue to operate as closed systems, are more likely to reproduce the pre-existing students' situation of 'exclusion' categories, thus, within a closed school system, the included remains included and the excluded remains excluded.

Conclusion

Teachers' comments illustrated that the school is an open system, because students' wider socio-economic and ethnic background seemed to affect their academic achievement at the school. At the same time, however, the school operated as a closed system in terms of controlling certain aspects, e.g. curriculum and uniforms, as it happens in a laboratory. The school closeness with its porous boundaries to the wider society left unaddressed students' *a priori* 'exclusion' categories and resulted in their reproduction at the school. The paper calls attention to a reconceptualisation of the notion of the school, within inclusive education, as an open system. This suggests that broader economic and social problems should be addressed, before implementing inclusion policies at the school. Further, it foregrounds the need for an interdisciplinary approach for analysing possible reasons which might affect the education of students, and particularly, vulnerable groups, at the level of the school. A number of stakeholders from a variety of disciplines should tune in their endeavours to resolve the issue of students' exclusion, e.g. economists, educationalists, psychologists etc. Further research should focus on the different mechanisms at the different levels of reality and how these interact with the school.

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