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## From Special Education, via Integration, to Inclusion: Continuity and Change in UNESCO's Agenda Setting

### Abstract

The idea that countries “ensure an inclusive education system at all levels” is the central objective of Article 24 of the UN-Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted in 2006. This article links up with a research project conducted in Comparative Education which analyses different uses of the term “Inclusive Education” in context of the World Conference on Special Needs Education, held in Salamanca in 1994, where UNESCO elevated the guiding principle of “inclusion” to the global educational agenda. The study deals with the follow-up of the World Conference in Salamanca and has a twofold focus: on the level of educational knowledge, particular attention is paid to the changes of the use of this term after it was coined. On the level of organisation, the study elaborates conceptually on the role International Organisations are playing in processes of transformation of educational knowledge.

**Keywords:** *UNESCO, Salamanca Process, Meanings of Inclusive Education, Analysis of meanings*

### Zusammenfassung

Die Idee, dass Staaten „ein inklusives Bildungssystem auf allen Ebenen“ gewährleisten, ist die zentrale Vorgabe des Artikels 24 der UN-Behindertenrechtskonvention aus dem Jahr 2006. Dieser Artikel nimmt Bezug auf ein Forschungsprojekt, das in der Vergleichenden Erziehungswissenschaft durchgeführt wurde und in dem verschiedene Gebrauchsweisen des Begriffs der „inklusive Pädagogik“ im Kontext der Weltkonferenz „Pädagogik für besondere Bedürfnisse“, aus dem Jahr 1994 in Salamanca, untersucht wurden. Bei dieser Konferenz hob die UNESCO das Leitprinzip der „Inklusion“ auf die globale bildungspolitische Agenda. Die Studie befasst sich mit der Nachbereitung der Weltkonferenz, und ihr Erkenntnisinteresse ist zweifacher Art: Der Fokus der Analyse richtet sich auf der Ebene pädagogischen Wissens empirisch auf das Konzept der „Inclusive Education“, genauer: auf dessen schleichenden Begriffswandel im Kontext von zwei Weltkonferenzen, die beide maßgeblich von der UNESCO einberufen wurden. Auf der Ebene der Organisationen wird untersucht, was die UNESCO im Zuge der Nachbereitungsprozesse der Weltkonferenz unter Inclusive Education verstand.

**Schlüsselworte:** *UNESCO, Salamanca-Prozess, Bedeutungen Inklusiver Pädagogik, Analyse von Bedeutungen*

### Introduction

“The use of a term in different social contexts”, stated once the German American sociologist Reinhard Bendix, “[is] itself a worthwhile subject of comparative analysis” (Bendix, 1998, p. 310). This certainly holds true for the case of “Inclusive Education” (IE) which could be – depending on the context being looked at – considered an idea, a word, a term, or a pedagogical concept that ‘traveled far’, was used in different ways, and thereby gained a whole variety of meanings. This article is linking up with a research project conducted in Comparative Education which analyses different *uses of the word IE – its meanings*, as Ludwig Wittgenstein would conceptualise it<sup>1</sup> – in connection with the follow-up of the “World Conference on Special Needs Education”, held in 1994 in Salamanca, where the principle of “inclusion” was raised to the global educational agenda (Kiuppis, 2014b). The principal element of the *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action* (UNESCO, 1994) which was agreed upon in this context was a ‘new thinking’ in Special (Needs)<sup>2</sup> Education (SNE). The main reference documents called on all governments to “adopt as a matter of law or policy the principle of inclusive education” (paragraph 3) and to reorient educational strategies to meet special needs in mainstream education. Indeed, by endorsing this text the conference participants marked an important turning point by initiating a development whose full scope they probably did not expect at that time: the construction of IE as an ‘imagined model’, “a decontextualized, general version of a scheme derived from real examples” (cf. on the Bologna Process, Schriewer, 2009, p. 34), and in the long run, the strategy to make IE the core of Education for All (EFA) (Opertti, Bradi & Duncombe, 2009). Until today, the World Conference in Salamanca is associated with a “paradigm shift away from Special Education thinking” (McMaster, 2012, p. 14) via integration through to “reaching out to the heterogeneity of learners and taking diversity as a starting point for educational theory and practice” (Kiuppis, 2014a, p. 753). In fact, the process that the World Conference in Salamanca started is from today’s perspective broadly looked at as a basic change in ideas from special education to inclusion (Forlin, 2012, p. 5; Kiuppis & Sar-

romaa Hausstätter, 2014). However, it is common sense that the Salamanca Statement reflected the idea of overcoming the divide between regular and special (needs) education (Kiuppis, 2014a, p. 753).

This article traces how between the focal organisation UNESCO and its “peers and competitors” (Scott, 1994b, p. 43) the idea for IE got translated as an ‘imagined concept’ with meanings that vary in accordance with context-specific understandings and different uses of the term on the national level in relation with SNE and EFA. The study systematically captured the follow-up processes of the World Conference in Salamanca on the basis of documents gathered in the archives of the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, which reflect the complete written communication of the *Special Education-unit* of UNESCO between 1994 and 2000. This is a period which was identified as significant in two aspects: on the level of educational knowledge, in terms of the changes in meanings and common understandings of the concept of IE which occurred little by little in connection with two World Conferences that were both mainly convened by UNESCO; as well as on the level of organisation, in terms of the changing role International Governmental Organisations like UNESCO were playing in processes of transformation of educational knowledge.<sup>3</sup> The data revealed that 39 actors were to be considered relevant for the issues at stake, out of which 16 organisations were classified as “Dominants” (first and foremost the UN, UNESCO, ILO, WHO, UNDP, UNHCR, UN/DPI, SIDA, and DANIDA) and 23 as “Supporters” and “Challengers” (McAdam & Scott, 2005).

In the next section, the article makes reference to the theoretical framework of the study. What follows then is a brief literature review that specifically reflects on different meanings in terms of uses of the words “inclusive education” and “inclusion” in the context of educational research. Thereafter, the main part of the article presents the study focusing on the “Salamanca Process” (Kiuppis, 2014a) through which IE came at first into prominence in context of ideational, as well as structural changes in the SNE programme of UNESCO in the years 1994–2000. At the end, the conclusion provides insights into the issues of continuity and change in UNESCO’s agenda setting.

### Theoretical framework

For the analysis of the discursive changes in meanings of the concept of IE in context of the UNESCO programmes of EFA and SNE, the research focus is, in a micro-sociological sense, directed at organisational sense- and decision-making that is interpreted as responses to institutional pressures. The chosen theoretical framework used in the study is Organisational Institutionalism. Particular reference is made to Scandinavian Institutionalism (see e.g. Czarniawska-Joerges & Joerges, 1996) based on theorising on the construction and deconstruction of institutions and along Brunsson’s analytic levels of “talk”, “decisions”, and “actions” (Brunsson, 1989). These works reflect a theoretical perspective according to which organisations are on the one hand driven by “pressures for legitimation” and “adaptions to environmental expectations”, and by self-intentions and self-interest on the other (i.e. that depend on the organisations’ identity) (ibid.). Those studies considered to be part of the strand of Scandinavian Institutionalism depict organisa-

tions as embedded in an environment that provides them with expectations, identities, and rules for action. In this view, a phenomenon undergoes change every time it is applied in a new organisational context because its meaning derives exclusively from this phenomenon’s connection to other elements in the organisational context (e.g. Boxenbaum & Pedersen, 2009, p. 189). Organisations are considered as embedded in enabling, as well as constraining environments that mediate expectations from peers and competitors and other actors in respective fields. However, of central importance for the analysis is the concept of ‘institutional logics’, characterized firstly as “sets of material practices and symbolic constructions which constitute [a field’s] organizing principles and which are available to organisations and individuals to elaborate” (Friedland & Alford, 1991, p. 248); and secondly, as “the cognitive maps, the belief systems carried by participants in the field to guide and give meaning to their activities” (Scott et al., 2000, p. 20). The concept of ‘institutional logics’ is connected with a theoretical perspective that has recently been developed complementarily to neo-institutionalism in Organisation Studies (e.g. Thornton et al., 2012).

### Different kinds of uses of inclusive education

The guiding principle of educational *inclusion* and the concept of IE are broadly considered innovative, but while in the literature there is overall agreement to the point that educational *integration* is first and foremost concerned with the question how children with disabilities can be ideally participating in mainstream schools<sup>4</sup>, there are quite some different positions regarding the question whom *inclusion* – and in this connection more specifically IE – is addressed to. While there is broad consensus that inclusion is associated with “schools for all,” in the international discourse there are differing agenda regarding the questions of how to theoretically frame the student population of IE. In the literature, three main positions can be roughly distinguished:<sup>5</sup>

Firstly, many actors and theorists, evidently the majority of whom are from the U.S., understand the idea of “meeting special educational needs in mainstream settings” (Thomson, Ward & Gow, 1988, p. 129), as well as the term IE, as primarily concerned with people with disabilities, either in the sense of “schools for all” or in the sense of education in integrated settings as an alternative to education in segregated settings (Baglieri Bejoian, Broderick, Connor & Valle, 2011).

Secondly, researchers have interpreted that idea as an objective to widen the focus of SNE in terms of the target group. Understood in that sense, IE is framed as a concept that is directed to all, but in practice focuses especially on particular populations that are considered the most vulnerable (e.g., working children; children belonging to indigenous, linguistic or religious minorities; nomadic children; children affected by HIV/AIDS), marginalized (e.g., children from households in rural or remote communities and children in urban slums) or that have “special educational needs” that traditionally have been attributed to people with disabilities.

Thirdly, a common understanding of IE is connected with approaches that are inspired mainly by the work of change agents in ordinary schools in the UK to reach out to the hete-

ogeneity of learners. In other words, these are approaches that take diversity as a starting point for educational theory and practice (Ainscow & César, 2006) and aim at answering the question of “whether the population [of special needs education – the author] was to be defined in terms of children in special schools or the wider population of children experiencing learning difficulties for any reason” (Mittler, 2010, p. 175). According to the wider understanding, IE is considered a non-categorical, all-embracing approach characterized by “ensuring a basic minimum standard of education for all” (Ainscow, 2012, p. 290) and deals with heterogeneous learning populations in which individual differences are not classified according to categories such as race, religion, gender, or disability.

### The study

What follows is a summary of the analysis on the basis of the primary sources regarding the question what the *Special Education-unit* of UNESCO – following Brunsson’s analytic levels of “talk”, “decisions”, and “actions” – stated, determined, and actually *did* in the course of following-up the World Conference in Salamanca. The analysis of the discursive changes in meanings of the concept of IE in context of the UNESCO programmes on SNE and EFA focused on organisational sense- and decision-making processes, which are interpreted as responses to institutional pressures. According to the theoretical framework, actors generally strive for gaining legitimacy (not primarily efficiency) and organisational conformity to the pressures from the environment simultaneously increases positive evaluation, resource flows, and therefore survival changes. In this connection, throughout the analysis particular attention has been paid to the dynamics of knowledge circulation with an emphasis on organisational decision-making. Using concepts that put emphasis on what meanings spreading ideas have and what modifications they undergo in the course of their “travels” the study analyses “organisational idea-handling” (Røvik, 2011, p. 637) – that means various ways different organisations relate and act towards educational ideas. It interprets the organisational behavior as a particular example of a transformation of intention as a consequence of organisational decision-making under ambiguity. Moreover, the study focuses on the construction of meaning that takes place in organisations and looks in the data for points in time and space where shared meanings of IE, SNE and EFA became contested and where contested meanings became shared.

The analysis of the complete written communication of the *Special Education-unit* of UNESCO in the time frame 1994–2000 revealed three phases of development which together reflect a period of significant change covering an overlap of diverse ideas and foci on the concept of IE.

### 1994–2000: A period of change covering an overlap of diverse ideas and foci on IE

According to the primary ‘institutional logic’ which determined the ‘talking’, decision-making and actions of UNESCO’s *Special Education-unit* in context of the world conference in Salamanca, SNE was – in line with the ‘old thinking’ – referred to disability. Accordingly, SNE was based on the dichotomy of normality and deviance and in so, connected with the motive to include a small number of exceptional children into a group of supposedly homogeneous majorities. That thinking emerged in context of the

UN-“Decade of Disabled Persons” (1983–1992). Consequently, it was highly politically motivated and – on the basis of experiences which showed that working in accordance with the ‘old thinking’ in SNE leads to exclusion – connected with the question how through IE people with disabilities could be dealt with differently in the educational mainstream.

The first phase (June 1994–October 1994) reflects the emergence of a new (secondary) ‘institutional logic’ within the organisational field under study – connected with the claim that IE should not be related first and foremost to people with disabilities but rather equally to all, and therefore to the heterogeneity of learners. UNESCO had so far been engaged its work on SNE in terms of disability-related issues. Through the entry of the secondary institutional logic, contradictory pressures occurred and thus UNESCO found itself in a situation of decision-making under ambiguity. On the one hand, the organisation was expected to carry on ‘business as usual’, on the other hand the secondary institutional logic meant the necessity to widen the scope. However, instead of taking up this new scope of SNE and cover the heterogeneity of learners and the whole variety of ‘special needs’ that result from different facets of life (e.g. being homeless, having drug-addicted parents, etc.), UNESCO’s *Special Education-unit*, as well as collaborating organisations, continued involving themselves in inter-organisational cooperation (mainly with WHO and UNICEF) that focused primarily on disability. The entry of the secondary ‘institutional logic’ into the field, according to which IE should not be understood primarily with regards to people with disabilities but encompass the heterogeneity of learning groups, remained largely ignored on the side of UNESCO. In other words, right after the World Conference in Salamanca, UNESCO neither actively proliferated the widening of the scope of SNE nor followed the strategy to have SNE form part of an overall educational strategy. Rather than being a marginal issue regarding how some learners can be integrated to mainstream education, in the light of the Salamanca Framework for Action, IE was considered an approach that explores how to transform education systems and other learning environments in order to address and to respond to the diversity of learners.

In the second phase (October 1994–February 1997) it became clear – particularly in processes of interagency cooperation, but also through distinction between actors, differentiation based on the division of labor, and due to the influence of the World Bank – that the guiding idea of EFA started to overshadow the general objective of SNE. Indeed, UNESCO kept on involving itself in co-operations with those “Global Players” that focused mainly on disability, but the *Special Education-unit* started to recognize that meeting special educational needs in mainstream settings meant to widen the focus of SNE in terms of the target group, for example by understanding IE as an approach to address the issues of *access to*, as well as of *participation* and *achievement* in education for various groups. This tendency can be illustrated with reference to a letter from the Head of UNESCO’s *Special Education-unit* to the leading epidemiologist from the WHO, which states (on October 28, 1994):

“(F)or education purposes, classification or use of category specific references is being reduced if not dropped. Thus there is a shift away from category specific programmes both in

terms of education provision and Special Education Teacher Training, and collection of statistical data on education.”

While this quote suggests that UNESCO recognized that the clear-cut differentiation between children with disabilities and members of their peer group (considered as homogenous) was part of the problem of their outsider role, the letter also reveals that at this point of time UNESCO still continued its old way of thinking with regard to who the intended recipients of SNE were meant to be:

“In education, the term ‘special educational needs’ is now used more and more widely to refer to learning difficulties and disabilities having direct implication on education intervention to support learning.”

However, “a shift away from category specific programs” did not imply (as a ‘non-categorical’ approach to IE in the light of the secondary ‘institutional logic’ would mean) that this ‘new thinking’ in SNE had to be about widening the old focus on people with disabilities towards all learners and particularly towards those who happen to have certain needs. Instead, ‘non-categorical’ referred to the turning away from “education provision and Special Education Teacher Training” that focuses on *specific disabilities*. While the underlying idea for the ‘new thinking’ in SNE was to end the tendency of ‘category specific’ fragmentation “by the creation of separate structures responding to the need for education of different marginalized, oppressed and socially disadvantaged groups”, like e.g. “disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities” (UNESCO, 1994, p. 6) – in the letter ‘category specific’ was not understood with reference to different groups. In fact, only children with disabilities were meant here. Therefore, the letter reflects a broader concept of special education (in the sense of integration) rather than a new departure of SNE in the direction to encompass the heterogeneity of learners.

In light of the theoretical framework, UNESCO’s wavering course is to be interpreted as an adjustment of organisational action and structures according to institutional pressures the organisation was exposed to at that time. Another example for that kind of a slow opening of UNESCO’s *Special Education-unit* to the idea that IE is an endeavor of wider mainstream education with social community (rather than just children and youth with disabilities, as target group towards moving to real inclusion) is to be found as in 1995, when the Head of UNESCO’s *Special Education-unit* was requested to contribute an article on “education of children with disability” for the journal *World Health*. Interestingly, in the draft of the article that was at that time circulated to colleagues within UNESCO, some parts contain, on the one hand, features characterizing ‘schools for all’ and thus, following the logic of what could be considered the ‘new thinking’ in SNE in line with the secondary ‘institutional logic’. On the other hand, the draft of the article reflects the other vision about the ‘new thinking’ in SNE, by retaining a focus on including learners with disabilities and others who experience difficulties in learning within the mainstream of education. The draft of the article for *World Health* refers to ideas that are connected with the attempt of widening the focus group of SNE (“Schools for All to achieve effective ‘Education for All’: include everybody, celebrate dif-

ferences, support learning, respond to individual needs”) but arguably did not translate the spirit of this idea in terms of avoiding categorical ascription of ‘special needs’ to people with disabilities. However, while the focus on people with disabilities in a draft of an article on “education of children with disability” is in this example obviously not revealing a tendency of UNESCO’s work in SNE at that time, the way how reference is made to “schools for all” still suggests for this case that the idea to widen the focus and to close the gap between SNE and EFA was shaped, changed and modified in meaning according to the primary ‘institutional logic’ of SNE, clearly still predominantly focusing on people with disabilities.

These examples reflect a discursive simultaneity of several meanings of SNE and EFA (including children with disabilities), in line with Wittgenstein to be understood as different uses of the same words getting reformulated in terms of their focus, content and meaning (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008, p. 226). Arguably, already at the beginning of the “Salamanca Process” (Kiuppis, 2014a), the ‘new thinking’ in SNE, compressed to the collectively agreed upon objective “meeting special needs in the mainstream,” was an impalpable catchall phrase that could potentially be ascribed to older practices (e.g., integration, ending up capturing both old and new ways of understanding), or be understood as a new way for the education of children with disabilities, as well as a new way for the education of potentially all learners.

In the third phase (February 1997–October 2000) it turns out that not much reference was made to the heterogeneity of learners and that therefore, the rhetoric, decisions, and actions were not motivated non-categorically with reference to diversity, but rather that the focus was on groups: people with disabilities, as well as other minorities classified as marginalized or vulnerable. The beginning of this phase marks the start of an interagency collaboration in which representatives of various International Organisations (e.g., UNESCO, UN, UNICEF, ILO and WHO) met frequently in order to discuss issues of children with disabilities in education. The goal of this “International Working Group on Disability and Development” was “[...] to promote multi-sectoral collaboration on the national level” (Kiuppis, 2014b, p. 178). The months of the foundation of this group turned out to be of particular relevance for the analysis of the continuity and change in UNESCO’s agenda setting since one of the main motives of this consortium (which also contained disability advocates, members of donor organisations, and individual experts) was to re-strengthen the focus of inclusion debates on disability. With reference to UNESCO’s interrelations with UNICEF, the changing emphasis that UNESCO programmes put on disability issues can be summarised as follows: while UNICEF did not participate in the World Conference in Salamanca, the organisation was the dominating actor in the field’s “central value system” (Shils, 1961, p. 124), exercising authority while running its SNE-programme in context with the integration paradigm. After The World Bank and UNICEF introduced IE into their respective programme structures in 1996, and starting to campaign IE first and foremost in relation to people with disabilities, UNESCO’s programme tracks for EFA and SNE gradually converged.

## Post-Dakar: UNESCO's inclusion agenda after the analysed period of change

Only recently UNESCO is re-joining forces with UNICEF on behalf of the "Education Taskforce of the Global Partnership on Children with Disabilities" to advance the right to education for people with disabilities in connection with an "Inclusive Education Network Collaboration," e.g. by ceremonially organizing an online discussion forum in connection with a "Knowledge Community on Inclusive Education". Somewhat in contrast to this initiative, UNESCO's focus in IE has recently been directed to a "wider concept" (Macura-Milovanovic, Pantić & Closs, 2012): for example, when searching for information on UNESCO's work in SNE and IE, one finds a website (<http://www.unesco.org/education/sne/>) that, although the link (still) contains the acronym SNE, reflects a mission statement that neither refers to SNE nor specifically to disability. Instead, it links up with paragraphs of the "Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action," as well as of the "Dakar Framework for Action" (UNESCO, 2000) that emphasizes education systems and schools with "inclusive orientation" according to which – pretty much in line with the education for all-agenda – schools should accommodate all children "regardless of their physical, intellectual, emotional, social, linguistic or other conditions" (UNESCO, 1994, article 3).

## Conclusion

"Our success in the years ahead will depend not so much on what we do as what we achieve", stated the former Director General of UNESCO, Federico Mayor, in the preface to the "Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education" (UNESCO, 1994, iv). This article shows that, consequent to Mayor's statement, after the World Conference UNESCO's unit for Special Needs Education continued to promote pre-Salamanca thinking through most of its actions and statements by continuing to frame SNE as before with special emphasis on the situation of people with disabilities. Arguably, UNESCO had at different times different understandings about what IE meant in terms of what target group this concept should be focusing on and how it should be related to SNE in the context of EFA. However, as Nik Theodore and Jamie Peck (2012, p. 20) expressed for the case of the OECD, UNESCO can be considered here a "consensus-finding organization [...], not so much a unilateral maker but a multilateral mediator of policy". Depending on the question of which group was considered the intended recipient of IE (if any, given that the non-categorical approach that focuses on the heterogeneity of learners avoids the classification of persons according to attributable features), UNESCO's measures of *how* to arrange education that is 'inclusive' changed considerably throughout the analysed period. Differences remain between contexts in which the same group was in focus: for example, regarding how "inclusive education systems", as imagined in the UN-Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006), are organized. That is the reason why national reports on IE, such as those published in context of the most recent International Conference on Education (held in 2008, in Geneva), declare all of the following settings as 'inclusive': "schools for all" with heterogeneous classes; schools with integrative settings; schools with special classes; and special schools as part of 'general'

education systems. When looking at implementation contexts – e.g. as reflected in national reports and messages of ministers at that conference – local differences in meaning of IE can be identified beyond the similarities in framing the issues around the concept at the global level (Kiuppis, 2015). However, since UNESCO had started to formulate the idea and disseminated the concept of IE in connection with the World Conference on Special Needs Education in 1994, the concept has grown in depth, in that UNESCO recently promotes a broader notion of IE in the context of general education, as compared to the narrower focus on IE in the 1990s', emerging from special education for exceptional children (meaning disabled or gifted). Nevertheless, the multiple 'institutional logics' which drove the use of IE in different social contexts on the national level are not anymore synchronized with the idea which started to circulate in the early 1990's in the „organizational field“ (Scott, 1994a, p. 208) of UNESCO.

## Notes

- 1 For the purpose of this article, the work from the later phase of Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein is offering itself as useful, stating that 'in general, the meaning of a word is its use in language' (Wittgenstein, 2001, §43, p. 596).
- 2 'Needs' is written in quotation marks because the organisational unit the study deals with changed its name in the analyzed period (from *Special Education-unit* to *Special Needs Education-unit*). At the time of the World Conference in Salamanca IE, the 'new thinking' in SNE was to be campaigned by the Special Education unit.
- 3 In addition to the archival documents, the study includes correspondences between the author and relevant experts who took part in the 'theorization' (Strang & Meyer, 1998) of the successive versions of the concept of IE, who were for the most part contacted via e-mail.
- 4 The phrase 'people with disabilities' is used here instead of 'disabled people,' in accordance with the U.S.-American Disability Studies community the author has been connected with as Affiliated Faculty, representing Sociology, in the Disability Studies Initiative at Emory University in Atlanta: <http://www.disabilitystudies.emory.edu/home/people/affiliatedfaculty.html>. For information on different uses of the term 'disability' in various academic cultures compare Kiuppis 2013, 152ff.
- 5 For a summary of the following literature review, with more references in German, see Lindmeier & Lütje-Klose 2015, 7–9. Method used for the literature review was 'thematic synthesis', a form of systematic review developed by James Thomas and Angela Harden, applied within several systematic reviews that address questions about people's perspectives and experiences (Thomas & Harden 2008).

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