Inclusive discourse in Greece: strong voices, weak policies

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This paper explores the inclusive discourse in Greece at a period characterized by change in policy and practice. The aim is to discuss critically the distance between the strong voices and weak practices that characterizes the Greek inclusive discourse. The first part focuses on disability and presents the ways that a ‘common sense’ understanding of disability is constructed in the public domain resulting in the de-politicization of the inclusive discourse. The second part focuses on inclusive education, discussing the contradiction between the rhetoric of inclusive education and the reality of the expansion of special provision for an increasing number of students. It is argued that the fragmentation of the inclusive discourse and the emphasis on common sense assumptions about human and social rights reduce policies about inclusive education to an add-on, peripheral element of the proposed educational reforms.

Introduction

This paper aims to explore the inclusive discourse in Greece capturing a snapshot of a period in time during which issues of inclusion, and especially of disability, seem to be prominent in the public domain. This new prominence is even more important considering that historically disability has been at the margins of any public debate,
defined mainly as a ‘personal tragedy’, which was considered to be a public concern predominantly in relation to the allocation of ‘scarce resources’. An optimistic reading of the current situation may be that the Greek society is undergoing a significant change of attitudes and perceptions, which in turn is going to affect current policies and practices in order to promote inclusion. However, this kind of simplistic

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optimism is misleading and does not acknowledge the complexities and contradictions of the Greek inclusive discourse.

Fulcher (1989) defines four main discourses on disability: medical, lay, charity and rights. The first three — the medical, lay and charity discourses — are interconnected since they have as starting point the ‘notion that impairment means loss’ (Fulcher, 1989, p. 27) and promote an individualistic perception of disability. The ‘rights discourse’, on the other hand, opposes to these traditional discourses challenging their assumptions, and focuses on disability as a political issue related to the exclusion and oppression of disabled people. Fulcher also adds to these four discourses another one, which she calls a ‘corporate approach’ that is an emerging discourse focusing on ‘managing disability’.

The Disability Movement as a social movement and the Social Model of disability (Abberley, 1987; Oliver, 1990) as a theoretical approach have been central in the emergence of the rights discourse. We are not going to attempt an overview of the social model of disability and of the various debates in relation to its limits and possibilities in this paper (e.g. Morris, 1991; Shakespeare, 1994; Corker & French, 1999). However, we perceive Oliver’s (1996, p. 32) claim that the social model of disability ‘does not deny the problem of disability but locates it squarely within society’ as a central one in formulating a political understanding of disability.

Discourses do not operate in a distinct, separated manner, but rather they intertwine
and compete for the same space. It is through this constant process of contest that discourses evolve, are transformed and become dominant in a given context and time.

The Greek inclusive discourse cannot be seen as a single, well defined, and all-encompassing discourse and of course, different aspects of the inclusive discourse have different degrees of visibility. In fact, we argue that the current compartmentalization of the inclusive discourse, that keeps specific aspects of inclusion separate, is one of the ways that this discourse is de-politicized and becomes part of a new language of political correctness. Using the examples of disability and inclusive education, as two aspects of the inclusive discourse, we try to highlight the process of compartmentalization and the ways that the strong voices that characterize the current situation in Greece in relation to (some) aspects of inclusion are translated into weak practices that could not challenge existing inequalities.

A new visibility for disability

The beginning of the 21st century can be characterized as the symbolic starting point of a new era for the Greek inclusive discourse. The language of social inclusion is now central in discussions of social policy, blending with the more traditional language of benefit-orientated policy. Socially excluded groups, or groups at the verge of social exclusion have been ‘identified’ and tailored policies have been provided for them. Groups such as disabled people, repatriates, immigrants, Roma, long-term unemployed people aged between 45 and 65 years, old people, people with no social security, single-parent families, ex-drug addicts, low-income households in isolated areas, are the main categories mentioned in relation to social inclusion.

Even though there are a number of issues related to the ‘identification’ of the groups ‘at risk’ of social exclusion and the ways that funding (from national, European Union and other sources) is allocated to them, there is hardly any dispute of the fact that ‘people with special needs’, ‘people with disabilities’ or ‘disabled people’ — to mention the main terms used — belong to this model of social exclusion/inclusion. In fact, in the majority of the texts referring to social inclusion, the category of disabled people sits comfortably at the top of the list.
In a cynical turn, it can be argued that disability has become the showcase of the inclusive discourse in Greece and in the process disability has turned into a very visible issue. The new visibility of disability is not only due to the policy of social inclusion. Other circumstances have also created a public forum for disability in Greece. The ‘advertisement’ in the media of the implementation of new policies for disabled people related to access, education and training, and employment, the fact that 2003 was the European Year for People with Disabilities and of course, the fact that Athens hosted the Olympic and Paralympic Games have put disability at the centre of the public domain.

This new visibility of disability in the context of social inclusion presents disability as a social category and disabled people as a social group discriminated against, and excluded. For instance, as it is stated in a newspaper article ‘in the Olympiad Greece of 2004 television reports uncover how people with disabilities continue not to enjoy equal possibilities for a decent everyday life’ (Diamantakou, 2004, p. 45). The language of social rights is used to express what happens and what ought to change.

At the same time, a different visibility of disability takes place. The last few years mainstream media — and especially television — promotes specific images of disabled people and of disability under the justification of an equal opportunities’ rhetoric. The Fourth Estate has taken upon itself the role of advocating for disabled people’s rights in Greece as part of a new type of journalism that focuses on ‘exposing’ inequalities, injustice, and misuse of power. This new form of journalism can be seen as a new form of ‘clientelism’

since the erosion of the state monopoly on broadcasting, the expansion of privately owned media with wide reach, and the introduction of market-oriented, ‘tabloid’ forms of reporting have given media interests new means to put pressure on politicians (Hallin and Papathanassopoulos, 2002, p. 191).

The ‘exposure’ of the inadequacies of the state and of institutionalized discrimination is almost an everyday affair, taking place through the narration of mainly individual ‘stories’ (mostly of misfortune but also of success) of disabled people. The media and especially television provide an easily accessible and powerful forum for people — disabled and non-disabled — to air complains, injustices, incompetence (e.g. medical errors). In many cases, the responsible agencies, government department, or ministers
respond promptly and with television coverage, which in turn reinforces the intervening role and power of the media.

It is difficult to have a full quantitative picture of the new visibility of disability in the media. To give an indication, in the four months leading to the Paralympic Games (June–September 2004) in every of the three public and the five main private television stations at least one report related to disability in the main news bulletins was presented in a daily basis. Some of the news stories were also presented in the morning zone and the current affairs programmes. In addition, the public stations had scheduled programmes dedicated to the Paralympic Games and the preparation of the Greek athletes.

The disability model that informs these reports is a hybrid one, creating a conflicting understanding of disability, as a simultaneously personal and social issue. Notions such as ‘personal tragedy’ and ‘success despite the adversity of disability’ are combined with references to social discrimination and to the barriers that society imposes upon disabled people. We call this a ‘common sense’ understanding of disability since it is presented as unproblematic and given.

‘Common sense’ understanding of disability

The common sense understanding sees disability as a well-defined condition based on a clear-cut distinction between disability and able-bodiedness, between the minority of ‘them’ and the majority of ‘us’. In this way, disability is presented as otherness. However, it is not a solely ‘personal’ approach since it combines both individual and social elements. On the one hand, disability is a ‘personal problem’, and in cases a ‘personal tragedy’. On the other hand, the need for equal opportunities and for respect of the human and social rights of disabled people is accepted in principle (this universal acceptance is not necessarily extended to other groups ‘at risk’ of social exclusion, e.g. immigrants, creating categories of ‘deserving’ and ‘nondeserving’ groups within the social inclusion discourse).

The tension between the personal and social — between disability as otherness and citizenship — is illustrated by the use of disability language. While disabled people’s organizations agree on the use of ‘disability’ and ‘disabled person/people’, in many cases
non-disabled television journalists, politicians and other participants in discussions are reluctant to use the words, opting out for different alternatives of ‘special needs’, ‘special abilities’, ‘wheel-chair user’ or even expressions such as ‘heroes of life’, ‘fighters’, and so on. In cases, disability is also referred to as ‘the problem’ and disabled people as ‘people with the problem’, and even the use of the word ‘problem’ is seen as more ‘politically correct’ and less stigmatizing than the word ‘disability’. The avoidance of the linguistic use of ‘disability’ highlights the deeply embedded perceptions about disability as a tragedy, as something that should not be mentioned but rather should stay unsaid and hidden. The awkwardness of the language used demonstrates the difficulty of bridging the gap between disability as otherness and as citizenship.

The most striking aspect of the common sense understanding of disability is the type of reaction that demands from the viewer/reader. The use of sensational narratives of the ‘suffering’ or ‘success’ of disabled person or of the barriers posed to disabled people by the planned environment, the bureaucracy, the interaction with services, and so forth, demands from the viewer/reader an emotional response without alerting his/her critical faculties. The ‘voices’ expressed through this understanding of disability are strong and emotive, but they lack a long-term political strategy for change. They demand immediate, ‘common-sensual’ responses and solutions by the viewer, by specific agencies, by the government and so on, but they have a very limited empowering effect since they perpetuate a sense of powerlessness against the structural barriers of the ‘system’.

A recent research of the Panhellenic Association of Paraplegic–Physical Disabled on the media representations of people with disabilities reports that 64% of the respondents consider the individual ‘case-study presentation’ of disabled people as a conscious strategy of exclusion (Skordilis, 2004). The dual positioning of the disabled person as a victim/fighter in an individualistic mode, does not promote equality in society, but it rather perpetuates old perceptions of ‘abnormality’, pity and charity that are incompatible with citizenship.

A third characteristic of the common sense understanding of disability is the forming of a very restricted category. As Goggin & Newell (2004, p. 48) argue,

there is another dialectic between the visibility and invisibility of disability. There are dominant ways of ‘seeing’ disability and making it ‘visible’ to the social gaze,
dominant ways of making disability ‘invisible’.

Physical and sensory disabilities are the dominant representations of disability in the Greek discourse. On the other hand, the dramatic expansion of special/inclusive education with the identification of large numbers of children and young people as having learning disabilities, autistic spectrum disorders, emotional and behavioural difficulties and so on is absent of the wider disability discourse.

One of the main issues discussed in the new visibility discourse is accessibility: cases of disabled people that are confined to their home due to lack of access; the lack of accessibility in public buildings (even in buildings where disabled people work); the accessibility of public transport; the way that the new ‘accessible’ pavements in Athens are not always properly designed and constructed; and the way that the general public is ignorant of and/or disrespectful of the accessibility features (e.g. illegal parking on wheelchair access points or on parking lots designated for disabled people) are some of the examples of topics presented in relation to accessibility.

One story is of special interest; whether the rock of Acropolis was to be accessible by the beginning of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. This story brings out all the particularities of the Greek inclusive discourse in relation to disability. A few months before the Olympic Games there was an attempt to reach a final decision in relation to the Acropolis’ accessibility. The proposed solution of an external elevator on the North side of the rock had apparently some downsides, including the facts that it alters visually the monument and it was questionable whether it could be ready for the Games (Kontrarou-Rassia, 2004a). The Greek Association of Archaeologists was quick in expressing their concerns on the viability of the project (Kontrarou-Rassia, 2004b).

The discussion of accessibility in the Olympic and Paralympic Games is connected to issues of national and cultural identity in a twofold manner. On the one hand, accessibility — and disability in general — raises questions about what kind of society we want to have and to what extent we are committed in realizing this society, it is about the gap between rhetoric and reality in Greek society. On the other hand, accessibility raises questions about the kind of society we feel that we need to present to others. In relation to the Acropolis’s accessibility, the National Confederation of People with Special Needs officially required from the Prime Minister who is also Minister of Culture to
‘demonstrate the same stress and concern’ that he demonstrated for the other Olympic projects in order for it to be completed before the Games (Skordilis, 2004).

The anxiety about the Games with looming deadlines, negative coverage by some international media, and the possible financial and other downfalls in the case that the event was not to be ‘successful’, stressed more the importance of a good performance during the Games and to have satisfied ‘customers’ — including disabled athletes and visitors, rather than the importance of long-term, successful planning for the city of Athens.

At the end, an external elevator was installed in Acropolis for the Games. The selected solution is not completely satisfactory, and there are plans to find a more appropriate, permanent one in the future. Accessibility was achieved; the elevator has proved successful given that in September 2004, the month that the Paralympic Games took place, 3216 people used it. The extent, however, that disability discourse remains limited to the ‘visible’ issue of accessibility and accessibility becomes a (poor) synonym for equality is highly problematic.

To sum up, the common sense understanding of disability presented above, is a very powerful one based on assumptions that are difficult to challenge since these are presented as a ‘benevolent humanitarianism’ and therefore as self-evidently ‘good’ and morally appropriate. The common sense understanding of disability is seen as part of the humanistic principles of the Greek culture and civilization. The voyeuristic use of disability for the creation of emotive images, the restriction of the visibility of disability to specific categories, the perpetuation of dependency of disabled people to the ‘good-will’ of the non-disabled, and of course the use of disability by the media to reinforce their role and ratings in Greek society are some of the issues that are silenced in the dominant disability discourse.

The common sense understanding of disability is presented as unanimously accepted and as a vehicle in educating the Greek society to the acceptance of ‘difference’ and in changing existing norms, prejudices and discriminations. The dominance of this understanding results in the silencing of alternative understandings of disability, of the complexities in the relation of ‘normality’ and ‘difference’, and of the voices of the majority of the disabled people.
Inclusion in education

In the previous section a general picture of the ways that disability is presented in the Greek media was discussed in order to provide an overview of the inclusive discourse in Greece. In this section, the emphasis is moved to the educational inclusive discourse.

The history of special education in Greece originates at the beginning of the 20th century when a number of private and religious charitable institutions for specific categories of disability were founded. From the middle of the 20th century the involvement of the State in special education gradually increased. The first law specifically devoted to special education passed in 1981 (Law 1143/81). This law introduced by the Conservative Party ‘New Democracy’ established the categories of students with disabilities and the types of special provision available to them. The 1143/81 Law is a quite significant legislation document for the history of the Greek special education despite the fact that it was never fully implemented since the same year there was a change in government. The socialist party ‘PASOK’ came to power for the first time ever in 1981 and stayed there (with a two-year interruption in 1992–93) until March 2004. PASOK introduced two major educational reforms, the first one in 1983–85 and the second one in 1998. The first one is especially significant for special education since the 1566/85 Law aiming at the overall restructuring of primary and secondary education, incorporated special education in the framework of general education. At the same time, the 1566/85 Law introduced the concept of ‘special needs’ but it did not abandon the 10 categories of disabilities that pre-existed.

As Vlachou-Balafouti and Zoniou-Sideri (2000, p. 33) state in relation to the 1566/85 Law:

Special education became a popular area and a direct result of its popularity was the creation of more special schools and the enrolment of an increasing number of so called ‘students with special needs’.

A practice that facilitated the expansion of special education was that of ‘special classes’ in mainstream schools. Special classes were introduced on a pilot basis in 1982 but very fast — and without the backup of formal assessment and evaluation — become the
dominant model of special needs provision.

Finally, the Law 2817/2000 for special education is the most recent law. It is the result of a long process of ‘negotiation’ and redrafting. It states that children with special needs should be normally educated in mainstream schools, unless the type and severity of their ‘difficulties’ do not make that possible. Amongst a series of measures, the law introduces the Centres for Identification, Assessment and Support that are founded across Greece and renames special classes into inclusive classes.

From 1985 onwards the main special education policy in Greece is this of ‘inclusion’. However, inclusion in this context is seen as the accommodation of children with special needs or disabilities in an educational system that is characterized by uniformity at a structural, organization and curriculum level. In this context ‘inclusion’ is clearly a special education concern, rather than a conscious attempt to restructure education. The dominant model of inclusive classes regulates the management of the ‘difficulties’ of the school population and at the same time avoids ‘contaminating’ the mainstream educational praxis with ‘special education intervention or differentiation’ (Zoniou-Sideri, 1996, 2004).

The lack of a dialogue around educational inclusion means that inclusion becomes a humanitarian rhetoric, a benevolent attitude towards a non-existing practice. In addition, any ideological or practical disagreement to inclusion stays unsaid and unchallenged, but still very real. In this manner, the official policy of ‘inclusion’ that characterizes Greek education during the last 20 years or so is translated into a steady expansion of special provision.

At present, we are in a position of necessary change in education since the new government plans to reform education. It is a very interesting moment in the history of Modern Greek education given the duration of the previous administration. One would have hoped for ‘inclusion’ to be highly up the educational agenda providing a theoretical framework for educational change. However, reading the programmes of the two political parties that exchanged positions in the national elections of 7 March 2004, the silencing of the ‘inclusive education’ discourse is striking. In these programmes the two parties declare their political vision and describe their proposed policies.

The PASOK’s programme (PASOK, The government programme of PASOK, 2004)
focuses on the achievements of its administration and on its plans for the future. In relation to education, it is claimed that the main aim is to provide ‘equal education opportunities of high quality to all’ with the development of an ‘open’, ‘flexible’ and ‘attractive’ educational system. This would be achieved with the implementation of decentralized policies and the use of the ‘active participation of society’, of dialogue, and of teachers’ creative possibilities. More specifically (PASOK, 2004, p. 82), there is short description (limited to a paragraph) of the main points of the decentralization proposed, which if implemented, would have meant the complete abandonment of almost two centuries of centralized education. However, there is no justification of such a drastic reform and no mention to the implications for inclusive education. In fact, there is no reference to ‘inclusive education’ but only to special education. Starting with the statement that ‘with our basic and inviolable principle the equal access of all young people in education, the 4-year period 2000–04 we created an infrastructure at all levels of education’ (PASOK, 2004, p. 81). PASOK’s (2004, p. 81) programme enumerates the increase in the number of provision for special education:

By now operate: 1074 Inclusive Classes in primary (PE) and secondary education (SE), 281 educational units of special PE and SE, 50 workshops of special technical and vocational education and training. In total, 1405 units operate catering for 18585 students. In addition, 11 educational units operate in hospitals.

In the above extract, it is interesting to note how the principle of ‘equal access’ is translated into specialized provision. The policy of inclusive classes means that schools in general do not change their practices but rather that a niche of special provision is created within them.

The New Democracy party’s programme (New Democracy, 2003–04a, b) on the other hand, starts with a critique of the PASOK educational policies and of their ‘amateurish and opportunistic character’. In relation to special education it is argued that ‘the condition of the schools that children with special problems of education [sic.] attend is far off from what is expected from a State with sensitivity for these children’ (New Democracy, 2003–04a, p. 4). Then, the detailed plan of the party for education reform is described. The reforms aim for ‘a modern school that removes social inequalities and
prepares students for their smooth inclusion in society and the production process’ (New Democracy, 2003–04a, p. 7).

One indirect reference to inclusive/special education is made in relation to pre-primary education and the special attention needed for the identification, response and education of children with ‘special problems’ as well as children with special abilities and talents at this level of education. Another interesting point is the reference to the practice of ‘additional teaching’ for students with learning difficulties. It is argued that this practice was introduced by the New Democracy government in 1993 but then it was more or less abandoned. However, what is needed is the ‘substantial reform of the [additional teaching] system’ in order for students with learning difficulties to get support to overcome these difficulties early. It continues that ‘special reference will be given to schools in which for social or other reasons learning problems are acute’ (New Democracy, 2003–04a, p. 13). Finally, it is stated that a number of measures of educational and social nature will be taken for minimizing the number of students that dropout of compulsory education.

The early identification and intervention, the practice of additional teaching and the concern about dropouts can be seen as part of an implicit inclusive discourse. However, this is a discourse based on the individual ‘difficulties’ that students belonging to different groups bring to the school and the appropriate ways that the educational system needs to respond to them.

In the New Democracy programme there is a section devoted to the education of ‘children with special needs’ under the heading of upgrade of central aspects of education. In the same heading the education of Greeks living abroad, multi-cultural education and private education are also discussed reinforcing the distinction between special and general education.

The starting point is the assumption that

the right of children with special needs to live in their normal [sic.] environment which is their natural family and the mainstream school of their neighbourhood, constitutes internationally one of the most important elements of change in education
This is a clear declaration of the importance of inclusion (even though the word itself is not used). The main measure for achieving this goal is by:

- increasing the number of students with special problems of education in the ‘common’ schools, with the implementation of supportive programmes of school inclusion. Teachers of special education, as co-ordinators of inclusion, will support the teachers of the mainstream school in which children with special educational needs are educated.

Overall, in the New Democracy programme it is possible to identify a more explicit inclusive stance since the PASOK programme is limited to enumerating its achievements in the field of special education. However, in both programmes the inclusive education discourse is silenced to different degrees not only because it is not a main strand of developing educational reform, but also because it is seen as a separate aspect of an educational system in which policies and practices are fragmented and sometimes contradictory.

Let us take the last statement presented above that initially seems more in favour of inclusion. A second reading highlights that ‘inclusion’ is seen as an add-on practice that is going to be performed by special education teachers when it is needed. This is the result of limiting once more inclusion to specific groups of children, in this case children with special educational needs.

Finally, both parties start from a notion of education encompassing knowledge, citizenship, social inclusion, and preparation for the demands of the market. However, the contradictions between these elements of education and the implications for inclusive policies and practices are not acknowledged.

**Limited view of inclusion**

The Greek educational system is a highly structured, centralized system in which...
decision-making follows a top-down model. A national curriculum, accompanied by syllabuses and textbooks, has ensured historically the ‘equal’ access to the same knowledge for all students. The new ‘Cross-Curricular Integrated Framework of Programmes of Study’ developed by the Pedagogical Institute (2002) to replace the existing national curriculum and aiming to achieve a more flexible model of teaching and learning, has not yet been implemented.

In this context of general education, the remits of inclusion are necessarily limited since there is little space for differentiated teaching and learning. The restrictions imposed by the structural characteristics of the system affect both teachers and students creating failure. The educational system is geared towards knowledge accumulation, exam results and qualifications demanding students to compete with each other in order to succeed.

Thus, inclusion is limited into a specific class within a school. New categories of ‘inclusive class teacher’ and of ‘students that visit the inclusive class’ are created and the responsibility of the school and teachers for the education of all students is further limited.

At the same time, special education has expanded in Greece the last twenty years. The numbers of specialized professionals — psychologists, special teachers, speech therapists and so on — are increasing. Even though there was a real need for specialized professionals, they have vested interests and compete to create their own space in a system with little flexibility. Anecdotal evidence, due to the lack of official statistics, shows that the number of children in pre-primary education identified as having autistic spectrum disorders, hyperactivity syndrome and emotional and behavioural difficulties is increasing dramatically. The increase of the number of ‘inclusive classes’ in pre-primary education schools for these new categories of disability threatens to erode the culture of the sector of Greek education that traditionally has been the most inclusive one. The medical model that many professionals bring into the schools focuses on the individual child rather than the education provided.

These trends are not unique to Greece. As Tomlinson (1985, p. 157) argues the expansion of special education is:

the result of rational action on the part of those who control and direct education
and training, to restructure the education system to fit the perceived needs of a post-industrial, technologically based society.

However, what is peculiar to the Greek situation is the speed that special education was established, expanded, and infiltrated general education in the last twenty years. This has created conflicting and contradictory policies and practices that hinder further the efforts of parents, students, teachers and other professionals for inclusion. What Slee (1996) calls the ‘clauses of conditionality’ that control, manage and restrict the realization of inclusion, are evident in the Greek context as well. Their power lies not only in the existing legislative limitations, but mostly in the overall unwillingness and inability of the education system to implement inclusion. Students, parents and families feel trapped in a system that instead of promoting a democratic inclusive school, uses the rhetoric of inclusion, as Armstrong (2003, p. 90) argues, as ‘a metaphor for the dominance of human capital over social justice’.

**Conclusion**

This paper tried to give a flavour of the Greek inclusive discourse in a period characterized by constant and quick change. This type of presentation and analysis means that we do not know the long-term effects of the decisions taken at the moment. This paper is a work in progress presenting ‘stories’ that are also in progress and therefore the ‘conclusions’ can only be tentative.

More specifically, in relation to the Greek inclusive discourse, we can identify the influence of international discourses promoting uniform responses to social issues. As was mentioned above, the language of social inclusion policy has become dominant in the Greek context. However, there are contradictions and ruptures between this discourse and the traditional ‘localized’ discourse of benefit-orientated welfare policy. In addition, the media representations discussed above provide a powerful locus for inclusive discourse, which does not allow for voices outside the common sense understanding of disability to be heard.

The history of Greek special education is also characterized by discontinuities since a
series of policies exist that were never enacted, and even the policies that were implemented have not been properly assessed. It remains to be seen whether the inclusive discourse would manage to underpin the rationale of the educational reforms to come. However, we are not optimistic since the lack of a serious debate around issues of inclusion and disability seems to create a discourse that is ‘loud’ in occasions but without a political voice.

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