Progress, challenges and barriers to the development of more inclusive education

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1. Conceptual developments in inclusive education

This paper primarily aims to share some analysis and concerns regarding the current development of the commitment that the vast majority of "state parties" – see the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNESCO, 2015) – have made to transform the generic right to inclusive education. The opportunities that life has afforded me and the dedication of more than thirty years to this subject have given me a broader perspective of the implicit and explicit challenges we have to face. These challenges ensure that the barriers limiting them, such as complacency regarding achievements, do not hinder the observed progress. It is important to stress that these analyses have, above all, a local value, although some of these barriers are very universal, and one repeatedly finds them in the international literature. For instance, initial teacher training to be inclusive and promote educational inclusion is still inefficient. Another example is the inadequate resources and facilities in mainstream schools to accommodate students particularly vulnerable to exclusion processes - students with reduced mobility or sensory or cognitive limitations or deficits.

Hence, I insist that we must not understand these reflections beyond the scope of our Spanish state of autonomies. Albeit very cautiously, considering diversity among its policies is as notable as certain countries. Therefore, I do not intend to make value judgements of a universal nature, which are

neither possible nor desirable, since doing so would surely mean delving, once again, into a colonialist vision of the subject (Walton, 2018). Nevertheless, I hope that some of the arguments and evidence put forward will inspire an unavoidable personal reflection that will have to see if what had been said makes sense in the closest context.

These reflections have their origins in an interview conducted for the Spanish Centre for Documentation and Research on Disability (CEDID). We have agreed with the magazine's editorial coordinator to maintain, to a large extent, the narrative style of that interview, trying, in any case, to ensure that this is not synonymous with superficiality. On the other hand, if there is one thing we have learned about this ambitious goal, it is its multi-level and systemic nature. Being thus its nature, it would be derisory to think that this text can analyse all the elements involved in this global commitment. For this reason, only a few that seem essential will be mentioned.

2. Understanding the meaning and evolution of the inclusive education construct

Many people have wondered about the purpose and the intention of talking about inclusive education and the meaning and scope of this adjective – inclusive – which, for some time now, we would say in the last thirty years, has been added to education. This quality of wanting to be more inclusive (because we are talking about a process) would try to connect us with one of the most important, human and beautiful ambitions imaginable: to wish for all children, adolescents and young people in school age, without exclusions or euphemisms regarding "everyone", equal and fair opportunities to be together, to recognise, respect and live together with dignity in their unique diversity and to learn without limits imposed by poor expectations, prejudices or social, family or school conditions of inequality.

This ambition has evolved in many ways over the years, both in terms of its understanding and its concreteness. Concerning what we might call the perspective or frame of reference for its understanding, firstly, there has been a fundamental shift regarding its moral and ethical foundation. This shift posits that "inclusion" (to simplify the term "inclusive education" for this text) is seen only as an essential educational principle. That is, a principle with moral value but which can be accepted, or not, by different educational actors and implemented if it is deemed appropriate and not too costly, and not only financially. Nevertheless, for fourteen years now, it must be interpreted as what it is today: a legally recognised and protected right at the highest level granted to a human right. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006) and the Spanish Constitution (art. 10.2) endorsed it themselves. Therefore, "the playing field has been changed", as Professor Barton (2009) would say. The measures necessary to move towards inclusive education can no longer be considered something at the mercy of some people's opinions, wishes, tastes, or the available means. Instead, we must see them as acute conditions for fulfilling this right. Otherwise, as the President of the Constitutional Court, María Emilia Casas (2007, p. 44), said, the absence of such conditions would be tantamount to "the outright abrogation of this right".

The second significant change in perspective that has taken place concerns the question, "who are we talking about when we talk about inclusion?". Thirty years ago, the answer to this question would be that we were talking about students who, in the 1980s, began to be recognised as students with special educational

needs. This recognition was mainly equivalent to talking about students with disorders and/or atypical development from a sensory, motor, cognitive or social point of view and the large and diverse group of students with specific learning difficulties. They all made up a heterogeneous group that could reach up to 20 % of the school population in some countries. Today the global consensus – if we look at what UNESCO (2020a) says in its latest global report on education in the world – indicates that the answer to this same question is that "we are talking about all students without exception". All means ALL, all students matter and all must be recognised with equal dignity and rights regardless of their personal conditions, such as health status, social, origin or any other kind. It is undoubtedly somewhat paradoxical that the thrust and the primary recent legal reference for upholding this right for all are the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Nonetheless, the truth is that it would make no sense to demand that our education systems should have that quality I referred to at the beginning of being inclusive, and then we would want to restrict it to only some, regardless that these few are precisely those who are most at risk of experiencing school situations of segregation, marginalisation, contempt, mistreatment or school failure at various intersections.

Finally, there has also been a significant evolution in establishing a model of understanding (but not yet of habitual action) on how and where to intervene to move towards this ambition, a model that we could classify as ecological, systemic and multi-agency. It is a perspective that tries to leave behind the models of individual intervention (medical model), focused on the limitations of students and on what they particularly need, i.e. specific, rehabilitative, normalising or homogenising interventions concerning human diversity.

Indeed, the implementation of this commitment has progressed. Besides, our education system (along with many others around the world) is much more inclusive today than thirty years ago (UNESCO, 2020b). There is nothing to object to or reproach ourselves for, actually the opposite. Nevertheless, the question is what rate of improvement we will adopt and consider acceptable for the significant challenges that we still have to face, indeed the most difficult ones (for example, the inclusion of the case of students with more extensive and generalised support needs). These challenges also give this right its most profound scope and meaning.

3. Between *derecho* and *desecho*

The slight variation between the Spanish words *derecho* and *desecho*[1] ("right" and "waste" in English) can help to illustrate, to a considerable extent, the perception and assessment of the current situation regarding the fulfilment of the normatively established right to inclusive education. For complex reasons, inclusive education today is more of a waste (according to the meaning of the Royal Spanish Academy quoted above) than anything else.

Worryingly, complacency seems to be giving way to what Professor Waitoller (2020) has called "selective or deficit inclusive education". This term only refers to some students, in some schools (those committed or provided with additional resources) and only at some stages of education (pre-primary, primary and sometimes some secondary education). Consequently, one could say that we are witnessing a deficient right. Many of us think that the ethical ambition we are pursuing does not fit in with this deficient inclusion.

1. Royal Spanish Academy. Desecho: 2. Whether used or otherwise, a thing that is of no use to the person for whom it was made.

Therefore, it is necessary to continue "denouncing exclusion", as Professor Ángeles Parrilla once said. Part of this denunciation is to criticise the attitude of complacency and those analyses, somewhat absolving our conscience, which people usually express with the phrase "we have come a long way, but much remains to be done", which means something like "do not be in a hurry". Nonetheless, excluded children, adolescents and young people do have urgency. Their life passes minute by minute, and this time will not return and will become a burden. Often, this load will be unbearable for their future and mental health if contempt, prejudice or discrimination have filled that time.

All these facts raise some questions on the underlying reasons for the undoubted and expected resistance to change that this ambition arouses. It is evident that, although fundamental, the consideration of inclusion as a human right is not powerful enough on its own to mobilise the profound transformations that our education system needs to undertake (De Beco, 2016).

On the other hand, we have extensive theoretical/practical knowledge from increasingly rich and rigorous research (as shown in this journal), both in terms of how to initiate and sustain the necessary processes of educational improvement and innovation and the psychosocial and psycho-pedagogical processes that we need to mobilise for this. Nevertheless, the truth is that this corpus of knowledge is not enough to narrow the gap between the desired and the reality.

At this point, a simple yet worrying reflection arises: we are facing a situation that is undoubtedly much more change-resistant than we imagined or would like to acknowledge. This resistance is closely related to the multilevel and multi-agency approaches mentioned above. In other words, there are numerous aspects to change (all of them interrelated) and many actors involved, with their conceptions, values and attitudes. We do not need a single place to stand and a single lever to move the system, as Archimedes proposed ("If you give [me a lever and] a place to stand, I can move the world"), instead we need many and diverse ones. Secondly, many of us who have worked to change this state of affairs have been too naïve. Moreover, the followed models of educational improvement, training and conceptual change have been, if nothing else, weak and ineffective.

Thirdly, we are generally so desensitised to others' pain that injustices involving the violation of human rights have much less mobilising force than we would ideally want. In this sense, there are constant calls to consider inclusion as a human right in this area and others (for example, the right to asylum, which thousands of migrants claim daily because of conflicts and ethnic persecution). This claim is futile, and even those who would have an obligation to make it effective *turn a blind eye* with apparent indifference and contempt.

Lastly, anew at all levels – from the Administration to the Academy – we have been rather cowardly because we have not dared to confront the doldrums of the *status quo* and the will to sustain the problematic multi-level change effort that inclusion requires. Instead, we have preferred the quiet shelter as usual or the simple academic critique or analysis of the existing barriers rather than the risky and turbulent journey towards this ever-evolving utopia that we call a more inclusive education. This is not an ethical reproach against anyone, nor is it said from any supposed moral high ground. Not at all! It is a statement of fact since it is natural and usual for almost everyone to be afraid and somewhat conservative. In contrast, the courage and determination to "put the values of inclusion into action", which is how the beloved Professor Tony Booth defines *inclusion*, are rather extraordinary and rare. For instance, the ongoing drama of immigration from North Africa trying to reach Europe via the Mediterranean. Every morning we hear news of dozens or hundreds of missing people, drowned at sea due to collective starvation and the extreme response of a few valiant rescuers, such as the crew of Open Arms or other similar NGO.

To conclude these reflections, the upheavals we are experiencing as global societies at the beginning of the 21st century, with a significant increase of the –isms (militarism, supremacism, sexism, ableism, individualism, ageism,…) and the phobic attitudes towards specific manifestations of human diversity (homophobia, transphobia, aporophobia,…) are not favouring an inclusive environment. More poetically, Bertolt Brecht said, "these are bad times for poetry".

4. How do we progress towards more inclusive systems?

It is now clear that significant changes in inclusion will not be possible without promoting an "ecology of equity" (Ainscow *et al*., 2013). This term means that what happens "beyond the school gates", "inside the school gates", and in the education system must be considered. Indeed, suppose in the contexts outside the school (those that tell us about the quality of life of the adults who educate their children), the living conditions are poor because parents and children live in contexts of poverty, violence, unemployment, substandard housing or limited community resources. In that case, educational action between schools and within them will be essential but undoubtedly limited in its capacity to movilize much-needed personal and social transformation.

For its part, talking about a systemic model should induce us to think and act on all the elements shaping the education system. In other words, to make our schools more inclusive at all levels of education, we must rethink and improve all the areas that shape an education system. This procedure includes academic planning, funding, academic staff training and curriculum-related measures. To put it differently, as long as we keep seeing inclusion as an exceptional, marginal and specific issue related to what to do and who is responsible for some *rare or special* students within the narrow framework of the so-called diversity measures, we will not emerge from the stagnation. Nor will we narrow the gap between the law and the obtuse reality that resists change.

Naturally, schools at large, and individual teachers in their classrooms, also have a responsibility to review their cultures, policies and practices (Booth and Ainscow, 2015; UNESCO-IBE, 2021). Thus, these will converge in the capacity to orchestrate an educational activity that allows for the equitable articulation of opportunities for all students to try to achieve or improve what we pointed out at the beginning: to be together, to participate and be recognised, respected and valued by their peers and learn without limits that have to do with expectations, prejudices or disabling conceptions and attitudes.

On this matter, my own experience and what research on inclusive schools has taught me is that these schools are on their way (not yet at a standstill or thinking about it) towards that particular goal of being "more inclusive today but less than tomorrow". However, there is always an educational community that has often stopped to think and rethink the human values that should guide its educational project while being honest in its responses. After all, it is not very honest to say in institutional documents that we favour inclusion, non-discrimination or quality education for all when there are policies that close the school doors to some students; that neglect preventive and warning policies towards attitudes favouring the marginalisation, mistreatment or contempt of some students; or that almost all the teaching staff sleep peacefully with high failure rates, at the same time as they neglect attitudes of collaboration, mutual support and interdependence at all levels.

Nonetheless, there are very reflective, collaborative, and empathetic teaching teams, putting themselves in the shoes of all their students and their families. Nevertheless, this does not mean that all their employees do so with the same intensity and constancy. They are schools where the "all for one and one for all" is, in a way, their primary professional culture when facing the problems and challenges of being more inclusive. They are the opposite of "every man for himself" or "everyone is responsible for their actions". Knowing that they have a long journey ahead of them, they pay attention to their planning and coordination processes because they know that the path is taken one step at a time. Furthermore, if they do not know how to do something, they seek help, advice, counselling or training within or outside their institution. They may complain, get angry at a given moment or feel exhausted or demotivated. However, they do not make excuses such as "I do not know how to do it; therefore, I do not do anything" or "as the families do not cooperate, I do not help either". They go around all day long "God helps those who help themselves (of their committed action)". Moreover, to not collapse, they support each other and celebrate all the small achievements (and the big ones, too); they laugh whenever possible and take care and comfort each other when things go wrong and some students slip through their fingers. They are not perfect, but they are honest, and together they build and try to maintain a distributed leadership where everyone contributes, although not in the same way. A leadership reinforced by the presence of unique people, both within the management teams and outside them, who strive to keep alive the vision they share, the will that moves them and the courage they need not to stop and say, as the poet says, *"I cannot go on, I am staying here, and here I stay"* (J. A. Goytisolo).

It is worth stressing that we must implement the change needed at different plans or levels (multi-level/systemic) and involve many educational actors (multi-agency) working towards the same goal. Among them are those responsible for educational administration at all levels, including inspectorates; all teachers (whatever their function); educational guidance services, support staff and families. Furthermore, in this group, we can also include the researchers and university educators training new generations of teachers, guidance counsellors and other professionals who are or will be involved, when the time comes, in this never-ending journey towards a more inclusive school.

5. To confront the challenges and the need for transformation, we need support

Today, no studies or international reports say that moving towards education systems is easy. Indeed, it is quite the opposite, and to try to progress, albeit slowly, requires a great deal of support and helping hands to open the door to inclusion. In this sense, it is crucial to rethink the concept of educational support that can be more coherent with the agreed ambition. We cannot continue to follow the narrow and dysfunctional model of support installed in many education systems, of which Spain is no exception. This is how I have set it out in other works (Echeita, 2021), and I still firmly believe in it.

In fact, in the collective ideology of most educational agents (administration, inspection, guidance, teachers and families), and the majority practice in schools, there is a model of support that is rather narrow-minded and, therefore, inefficient in the long term (Sandoval *et al.*, 2012). The reason for my assessment is that:

a. "Educational support" is generally equated with educational care work, more or less individualised or in small groups. Teachers specially dedicated to this task (specialists in Therapeutic Pedagogy (TPs) and

audiology and language (ALs)) or other professionals (physiotherapists, social integrators or technical education assistants) carry out this work.

b. This support is for students with "special educational needs" (SEN) and students incorrectly called "compensatory" students.

c. On more than a few occasions, these support teachers assume responsibility for the adapted educational programme (planning and carrying out the so-called "individualised curricular adaptations (ICAs)") for these *special students*, in a frequent exercise of neglect or transfer of responsibility on the part of the teaching staff to these students in particular.

d. In turn, and very often, such work tends to take place in specific classrooms by taking these special learners out of their reference group to receive the support deemed relevant in terms of content and duration, either individually or in small groups.

e. The convergence of these conceptions, attitudes and actions leads to practices that do not mobilise improvements for everyone. Consequently, instead of reviewing and adjusting their programming and teaching with criteria, for example, those of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Villaescusa, 2022) or those established by the LOMLOE (art. 4. 3), teachers tend to retain the educational *status quo*. In other words, they maintain practices that can be readily acknowledged as barriers to the presence, participation and/ or learning of some students who need other and more inclusive practices (Arnaiz y Escarbajal, 2020).

From my point of view (Echeita, 2021), the LOMLOE would have been an excellent opportunity to advance in this strategic component, since it could have taken the excuse of the broad categorisation of the construct "students with specific educational support needs" (SESN) (LOMLOE, title II, chap.1), to have introduced a broad, comprehensive and inclusive vision of support.

An inclusive model of school support has different dimensions to consider. The first thing is to have a broader definition of support in line with everything we know today about this construct from different fields. For example, the current understanding of disability in general or intellectual disability in particular (Amor *et al*., 2020) or how authors such as Booth and Ainscow (2015) or Puigdellivol *et al.* (2019), among others, have approached it. Taking such frameworks as a reference alongside several colleagues, we have ventured to propose a definition of inclusive support as follows:

> "Educational support involves articulating all the values, policies, practices and common and specific educational resources that a school can mobilise to mediate between the personal conditions of its students and the school demands, which, mainly, are materialised through the curriculum and school organisation. The aim is to maximise the opportunities for all students to access or be present in all educational and extracurricular spaces; to participate (understood in terms of a sense of belonging and emotional well-being), and, at the same time and for all of the above, to learn, progress and perform in conditions of equity concerning their peers" (Echeita, 2021, p. 14).

Hence, we would not conceive the educational support as an individual matter required by some students due to their personal or social conditions. It would be shaped instead as a global and complex construct (not reducible to one or some of its components); multifactorial (involving personal factors, such as the student's health/functioning status, and contextual factors, such as pedagogy, school organisation or the type of assessment carried out in a school or by a particular teacher); dynamic (changing according to the improvement, stagnation or worsening of personal and contextual factors) and multilevel (since it is located both in the school culture and in the policies or "systems of practices" (Puig Rovira, 2012), which operate in the classroom and other educational spaces and moments.

All students would benefit from educational support in this way. It would prevent the development of new or greater situations of disadvantage that some students may experience. However, for each student, it would be specific in terms of a concrete need for support.

Within the model proposed, the construct of the need for support would also need to be developed and specified in greater depth and with a more solid basis than the brief definition provided by the LOMLOE (art. 71.2.)" students who require educational attention different from the ordinary". In the model I am outlining,) educational support needs would refer to the profile and intensity of educational support that a student would require for being present, participating and learning in activities related to the normative school functioning of a given academic year/stage.

According to the *Response to Intervention* model (NCRI, 2012), the profile of support needs is articulated in terms of the actions or measures required to meet these needs. As done in Decree 150/2017, of 17 October, of the Government of Catalonia, one could distinguish three levels of educational care for students in an inclusive education system framework[2]. The first level includes standard or universal measures for all students of a preventive nature and promotes access, participation, and learning. Secondly, we can find the additional measures and support for those students who require them and which aim to "make it possible to adjust the pedagogical response flexibly and temporarily, focusing educational intervention on those aspects of the learning process and personal development that may compromise personal and school progress". Finally, there are the intensive measures and supports that would be "extraordinary educational actions adapted to the singularity of some students that allow adjusting the educational response in a transversal way, with a regular frequency and no time limit".

Portugal is following precisely this model in its latest educational reforms on inclusive education, in particular after Decree-Law No. 54/2018 of 6 July 2018 and the subsequent amendments introduced by Law No. 116/2019 on 13 September. These regulations have made it possible to establish a way of thinking and acting in Portugal that is very different from the one we know in Spain and which, among its most outstanding elements, are:

a. to drop any system of categorisation of students, including the category of "special educational needs";
b. to drop the traditional model of special legislation for special learners;
c. to establish a continuum of support provision for all students;
d. to focus on educational responses (support needs) rather than categories of students based on clinical labels;
e. to keep in mind that the goals of the inclusive education framework are all children, learners and students.

The relevant aspect of the Portuguese experience is that it is making a radical commitment to a fully inclusive approach and that, probably because of this, its school results on performance, as measured by the indicators used in PISA, are among the fastest-growing in OECD countries in recent years. Evidencing, thus, the premise advocated by Professor Ainscow (2020) that "equity is the path to excellence in education" (Hatch, 2022).

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2. https://dogc.gencat.cat/ca/document-del-dogc/?documentId=799722 .

A last reflection on the objective of rebuilding support policies within the framework of a more inclusive education concerns the need to change the way schools are funded and equipped with specialised teaching and non-teaching staff to be in a better position to respond with facts and not just good intentions, to the challenge of more inclusive education. In this sense, Portugal and other countries have adopted the so-called throughput model of funding (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018), also known as the supply-side approach. This model is not based on the number of students labelled as having special educational needs (with this or a similar denomination) but is linked to the obligation for all schools to perform specific tasks or provide certain services related to the capacity of mainstream schools to respond fairly and in an inclusive approach to the diversity of support needs of all their students.

For this purpose, a suitable scheme is to provide all mainstream schools (schools and high schools) with support staff, according to the estimation of a natural proportion of students with extensive and/or more generalised support needs and assuming that all publicly funded schools have to provide schooling for all students, regardless of the profile and intensity of their support needs (UN, 2006, art. 24). This approach would imply that all pre-primary and primary schools with at least two lines (between 18 and 20 units) would have two or three support teachers as a starting point. This support teaching staff should also be reinforced with the permanent incorporation of educational guidance professionals, which would make it possible to set up strong inclusion support units. A similar proportion would also apply to secondary schools, where the presence of guidance counselors should also be increased according to the ratio proposed by UNESCO; 1 counselor for every 250 students. However, this would not limit the possibility of incorporating new support if the school has particularly complex factors and a more significant number of vulnerable students than it would have to provide schooling for them.

The space available in this text does not allow for further analysis of other aspects that come into play to articulate, with greater or lesser success, an inclusive system. In this sense, it would be very relevant to analyse the role of Special Education Centres (SEC) and other specialised services in this process, a task that recent work has tackled (Echeita y Simón, 2019). On the other hand, if we were to close the focus of our attention to the psychosocial processes in the classroom that we should most care about, we would have to talk and learn about the processes that lead to social participation and a sense of school belonging, which are crucial to achieving the quality inclusive education that we still do not have (Porter *et al.*, 2021).

I conclude with what must necessarily be a continuation because we cannot afford to stagnate where we are. To a greater or lesser degree, we are all responsible for this state of unrest that we are now experiencing globally, and it is up to all of us to be more courageous in order for it to change. Otherwise, we will deserve the judgment Camus once made of the conformist intellectuals of his time: "I despised them, because being able of so much they have dared so little". Hopefully, this will not be the case.

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