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The creation of cultures of inclusion, the development of inclusive policies, and the implementation of inclusive practices

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Abstract

With the Salamanca Declaration on Special Education, the entire educational system promotes and encourages the inclusion of all students in mainstream schools, regardless of their origin or developmental issues. Although inclusive education has followed a distinct and separate path from special education in its evolutionary phase, they both emphasize the common ideology of responding to the needs of students to ensure their full participation in the educational process, whether they have disabilities, behavioral problems, or face segregation due to different ethnic backgrounds.

Keywords: Culture of Inclusion; Inclusive Policy; Inclusive Practice; Disabilities; Special Education; Special Learning Needs.

1. Introduction

To make the multicultural school successful, the existence of an inclusive approach successfully implemented in the curriculum is required, with the support of all stakeholders. Specifically, the viewpoint has been articulated that for an inclusion program to be considered successful, three dimensions are required: the cultivation of a culture of inclusion among both educators and students, how this culture can be translated into a comprehensive policy followed by all and involved in the educational process, and how this can become a reality through the adoption of simple and effective practices (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). The excerpt is part of a comprehensive work called the "Index for Inclusion," which serves as a tool for all stakeholders involved in inclusive education. It describes the ideology that underlines inclusion as a whole and provides specific tactics that can benefit educators in their work. This text has been recognized worldwide, as evidenced by its translation into 32 languages. The significance of this work is quite unique, as it describes the entire process for contemporary schools to succeed in their inclusive mission.

2. Definitions - basic terminology

In order to make the above analysis of the topic clear and comprehensive, it is advisable to provide the definition of inclusion and, by extension, inclusive education. Inclusion and its related practices should not be considered synonymous with the concept of integration. In summary, the concept of inclusion emphasizes the "promotion of quality in education and life, as well as effective school practices" (Stasinós, 2016). According to Stasinós (2016), there are certain elements of the definition of inclusion that are essential for adopting inclusive practices. These are briefly summarized as follows: placing children with difficulties in the neighborhood school, thus emphasizing the spatial dimension of inclusion; maintaining national proportions, meaning numerical balance between students with and without difficulties; cultivating a philosophy of zero rejection, where no student is excluded from the neighborhood school; placing students based on age and grade to maximize socialization; and promoting cooperative learning to

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encourage social interaction among students and enhance the spirit of collaboration (Sailor, 1991, as cited in Stasinós, 2016).

The very useful definition by UNESCO (2009) states that "inclusion is considered as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all children, youth, and adults through increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and reducing and eliminating exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures, and strategies, with a common vision that covers all children of the appropriate age range and the conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children" (UNESCO, 2009, pp. 8-9). In the above definition, three particular points are worth noting, emphasizing the concept of inclusion.

The first element worth commenting on is the concept of 'process.' This characteristic of inclusive educational policy emphasizes that inclusion is an active process and a daily effort to enhance it, rather than a passive acceptance, such as the concept of a state or condition. It is also not a policy change that can be imposed and adopted effortlessly.

The second crucial element that requires analysis is the phrase 'all children.' As emphasized in the literature, educators should be able to include not only typically developing children of the dominant ethnic group but also students with diagnosed difficulties and syndromes, behavioral issues, or other such problems. This includes students with a migrant background as well.

Finally, this dynamic process should govern the entire school and its daily reality, referring to changes in the curriculum, the content of the curriculum taught, the approach to students, the material aspects of the classroom, as well as the implementation of general educational strategies.

3. Creation of inclusive cultures

The once marginalized dimension of culture is, according to Booth & Ainscow (2011), a central idea of inclusive education, which is why they place it at the base of their pyramid. As it emerges, the creation of cultures of inclusion by Booth & Ainscow (2011) includes two components: establishing the idea of community among students, parents, and educators, and determining inclusive values.

As the researchers themselves highlight in the development of the inclusion framework, it should be noted that the culture of inclusion should be cultivated not only among educators and principals but also among parents, students, and the entire community to achieve inclusive work universally. The participation of parents is considered important, and their role is sometimes marginalized. It is emphasized that, in addition to their regular information on matters related to their children and the educational system and school policies in general, their regular visits to the school are encouraged. This is because they "contribute to effective communication between the school and the family, offer assistance and support to the principal and teachers, and express their opinion on educational issues concerning their children... Communication between parents and educators creates an atmosphere of trust, which can improve the quality of the assistance provided by the school and parents to their children" (Poulpoulou, 2019).

In order to make clear what exactly the culture and the values it brings are, a brief overview of the characteristics attributed by researchers who have dealt with the analysis of this definition should be made. School culture as a concept is considered a central axis around which the entire school organization evolves, with the aim of its optimal functioning and performance. Therefore, the importance of the existence of culture is evident, and how closely it is linked to the success or failure of the respective school or organization. According to Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins (2006), for a school organization to be successful, its leaders must possess such leadership abilities, summarized as "a. building a vision and shaping directions, b. understanding and developing people, c. redesigning the organization, d. managing the teaching and learning program." According to the above excerpt, school leaders should be able to build a vision and set directions towards inclusion.

Significant is the view of Ouchi, who, among other things, emphasizes the idea that "culture consists of symbols, rituals, and myths that convey the values and beliefs of the organization to the employees" (Ouchi, n.d., as cited in Chatzipanagiotou, 2008). Analyzing the above placement, the role of leadership as a key factor in cultivating and ensuring culture is highlighted, while it is also important to ensure the transmission of symbols and rituals that characterize the organization to ensure its smooth continuity. Additionally, Hoy and Miskel (2008) define culture as a system of common orientation that holds the members of the organization together and gives it a distinct identity. Orientations include values, rules, myths, behaviors, and silent assumptions. At this point, the researchers chose to emphasize culture as an identity dimension that characterizes the organization and sets it apart from others, while also

adding elements of behavior and values as part of culture. According to Chatzipanagiotou (2008), a key factor in school culture is the principal, who, as a "role model who conveys the core of common beliefs, values, and behaviors... can achieve it when... provides time for educators to collaborate and learn from their experiences... promotes professional development and collaboration among educators from other school organizations, creating positive models... encourages feedback through discussions among educators, and provides encouragement to educators during times of crisis".

In all of the above cases, the role of the principal is a key role, as they are responsible for creating a culture based on their own vision and ensuring the full participation and support of educators, with whom they must collaborate constructively and be active listeners to their needs and opinions. Additionally, the school principal takes on the responsibility to "cultivate a positive environment, guide collective planning, evaluate the educational staff, strive to have the necessary infrastructure, and ensure the effective functioning of the school" (Pasiardis and Pasiardis, 2006, p. 22). However, in the new environments of inclusive education, distributed leadership is observed as a fundamental leadership model, which also highlights the role of educators who drive the entire endeavor and vision of the leadership and ensure the implementation of the culture in practice, realizing the once arbitrary idea.

From all of the above, it is clear that for a school to move towards an inclusive direction and acceptance of all students equally, the leaders themselves must take on the responsibility of ensuring and transmitting the vision of a common school for all, a school that has no place for discrimination but is characterized by cooperation and a sense of respect for others. At the same time, they must ensure the interconnected collaboration of all, the necessary values that emphasize a positive culture. Finally, it should be noted that the culture of a school organization, as expressed by the principles and values that govern inclusion, can either assist inclusive education as a whole or become a significant obstacle to the implementation of inclusion in the entire educational process when the basic principles and values are lacking, as evidenced by the position of culture at the base of the Booth and Ainscow pyramid.

4. Production of inclusive policies

Once a culture of inclusion is established by the school principal and those responsible for the teaching staff, it is essential for leadership, in collaboration with specialized personnel and always in consultation with educators, parents, and the students themselves, to develop policies that will ensure the maximum benefit of inclusion. According to the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011), this element of the pyramid includes the development of a common school for all students without exception, as well as support for the existence and preservation of diversity, contrasting the operation of the inclusive school with that of the assimilationist model.

According to Pouloupoulos (2019), "the inclusion of some children brings about changes in school organization and promotes effective teaching and learning strategies, so that the school becomes a place where all students learn" (Szumski, Smogorzewska & Karwowski, 2017, as cited in Pouloupoulos, 2019). Referring to the above excerpt, it is understood that a school's policy is shaped by both organizational changes at the school and classroom levels, as well as changes in teaching and learning strategies. Therefore, the key is to change the formation of a policy for an inclusive culture and, based on these changes, to organize and implement corresponding policies that reflect and support the inclusive culture.

The presence of children with special educational needs in regular school classrooms can have a positive impact on the development of inclusive policies. As Pouloupoulos (2019) states, "the presence of some children in our classrooms who belong to vulnerable groups prompts us to open up new possibilities in the quality of the provided education, which can ultimately benefit all those involved. And most importantly, each student's unique way of learning can serve as a catalyst for new thinking, experimentation, and ultimately, new teaching methods by the teaching staff" (Messiou & Ainscow, 2015, as cited in Pouloupoulos, 2019). According to the above, students diagnosed with differentiated learning needs should not be seen as a threat to the integrity of educators' work or the cohesion of the class. On the contrary, they should be treated as a challenge for collaboration and their constructive presence in the classroom together with other students. This ideology not only guides the production of policies but also reflects the values that were discussed in a previous section and are an integral part of the culture.

In the same context, the presence of children with immigrant backgrounds can also benefit children from the dominant culture. From this perspective, the policy of including immigrant and refugee children in the educational framework of the host country can foster a spirit of collaboration and eliminate issues of racism and xenophobia among students. Pluralistic societies, as they have evolved in recent decades with new migration flows, make it imperative to implement intercultural strategies in the school reality. According to the findings of Nikolaou (2014), a very high percentage of foreign students are victims of school bullying, indicating how important it is to implement targeted educational

strategies with the ultimate goal of enabling students to develop an open mind, enhance their empathy, and interpret knowledge and values about others in a multicultural context within a democratic culture (Bruner, 1990, as cited in Nikolaou, 2014). The ultimate goal of all the above is for schools to become places for the development of free, democratic, and tolerant consciousness that can resist undemocratic deviations (Nikolaou, 2014). To create a society that respects diversity and encourages active interaction among people from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds, it is necessary to instill the right values and ideals in students and citizens of the new world. Therefore, the creation of inclusive policies for all students in the unified school network is essential to build a new intercultural society free from any notions of racism and xenophobia, as expressed by the culture that accompanies the educational organization.

Finally, regarding the development and formulation of inclusive policies, it is emphasized that students play an active role in decision-making. The once marginalized role of students and their "voices," as mentioned in the literature, are at the core of the new inclusive school. In contrast to the centralized educational systems that characterized the educational process, the inclusive culture defines the collaboration with an active role for students in the educational practice and in making critical decisions that concern them. The benefits of such a process are manifold, both for the students themselves, who develop a positive self-image (Catling, 2014), and for the overall educational process. This is because the opinions of children help sensitize educators to diversity issues (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018) and identify marginalized individuals (Rose & Shelvin, 2017). Additionally, it leads to a reduction in school failure (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006).

5. Development of Inclusive Practices

Once inclusive cultures have been cultivated and ensured among school leaders, educators, students, and parents, policies should be designed based on inclusive principles, without discrimination. The underlying ideology in these two phases is significant when embodied through practices in the school classroom. This means that the teacher of the class has the knowledge and support of specialists and, of course, the disposition emphasized by inclusion to implement policies as they become a reality through the existing educational culture. Furthermore, it is recommended to use appropriate electronic equipment, which will not only assist the work of the educator but will also create a conducive environment where all students can coexist and engage in activities simultaneously. As described by Booth & Ainscow (2011), the development of practices involves organizing the curriculum in accordance with the basic principles of the inclusive approach and the use of tools and equipment that will allow parents, students, educators, as well as local communities to ensure their participation in the productive learning of the inclusive school.

Another effective practice in the school context is the "promotion of innovative activities by educators, so that students accept challenges and strive to enhance their self-confidence and creativity in their actions" (Poulpouloglou, 2019). Through these innovative activities, the role of collaborative learning and multi-sensory information sources is strengthened. In other words, educators design and use group schemes and activities that involve collaboration to ensure the creative participation of all students during teaching hours. Specifically, educators are encouraged to use group games and activities that aim to create empathy among the entire student population, as well as a more experiential approach to multilingualism and interculturality through collaborative activities (Kagka, n.d.).

Furthermore, aiming at sensory learning, educators can overcome the language barrier in intercultural linguistic environments, as well as the difficulties presented by written language in individuals with learning disabilities (Mpastea, 2014) or other challenges. At the same time, it is important to emphasize the individual differences that should be maintained within the framework of inclusive culture, as each person perceives the world around them differently through their senses.

Finally, informal learning environments can play a crucial role in realizing the inclusive work of educators, as they provide students with the opportunity to practice their essential communication skills in settings outside the classroom. This helps students overcome language, writing, or even the confined classroom environment barriers. As described by Conner (1997, 2005), Rousseau (2004), and Vavoula (2005), "informal learning describes a lifelong, intensely experiential process, whether deliberate or non-deliberate" (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004, Perdikaris, 2006, as cited in Mitrakou, Giavrimis, & Papanis, 2011).

Informal learning environments hold a prominent place in inclusive education models because "an individual can harness learning experiences and circumstances according to their inclinations, their learning profile, and their interests. Consequently, the natural, spontaneous, and non-regulatory manner in which informal learning occurs allows for the removal of limitations and provides access to learning for all people, contributing to a learning process that includes all students" (Green, 2008, as cited in Mavridou, 2016).

6. Discussion and the role of ICTs

Researchers Booth & Ainscow (2011), through their work on the Index for Inclusion, provide contemporary educators with a comprehensive guide based on the fundamental principles of inclusive education. It represents a new trend in educational circles and among researchers, serving as the ultimate tool for fostering an inclusive and non-prejudiced society grounded in the values of interculturality and social justice. Rejecting any divisive element among students, these researchers propose the three-dimensional pyramid for inclusion in their mainstream school class. At the base of the pyramid lies the concept of creating an inclusive culture, realized through the principle of fostering inclusive values, which will subsequently be transmitted to educators, students, and parents. In this regard, the role of the school leader was analyzed and highlighted as being responsible for shaping the vision and fundamental principles within the school community and cultivating inclusive principles.

Furthermore, the issue of cultivating cultures encompasses action and the transmission of the idea to educators, students themselves, their parents, and, on a secondary level, to the entire society. Concerning the development of inclusion policies, Booth & Ainscow (2011) emphasize the importance of creating a school for all with respect and attention to maintaining diversity and individual identity. Such policies include the adoption and maintenance of inclusive practices, the inclusion of individuals with specific learning or developmental difficulties, as well as intercultural policies for the creative coexistence of all students in the classroom. It also involves considering the opinions of students seriously in decision-making processes. For this to be successful and yield the maximum benefits, the classroom teacher must utilize and maintain practices that lead to a more inclusive policy.

Finally, we emphasize the significance of all digital technologies in the field of education and in inclusion domain, which is highly effective and productive and facilitates and improves assessment, intervention, and educational procedures via mobile devices that bring educational activities everywhere [21-24], various ICTs applications that are the main supporters of education [25-44], and AI, STEM, Games and ROBOTICS that raise educational procedures to new performance levers [45-52]. Additionally, the development and integration of ICTs with theories and models of metacognition, mindfulness, meditation, and the cultivation of emotional intelligence [53-86], accelerates and improves more the educational practices and results, especially in inclusion, treating domain and its practices like assessment and intervention.

7. Conclusion

These practices include adapting the curriculum to meet the needs of all students, using technical equipment, implementing multi-sensory learning, and learning through informal environments. Therefore, in the Index for Inclusion, the creation of inclusive practices is embodied through changes in the curriculum and the use of materials and equipment that facilitate learning and make the curriculum accessible to all.

From the above analysis, it becomes clear that inclusive education cannot exist without the individual elements or facets of the Booth & Ainscow triangle. In conclusion, although the areas of culture, policy, and practices can be considered different elements in the formation of the inclusion triangle, as shown by the analysis in this work, they are inseparable and mutually overlapping layers of a single design aimed at implementing basic and fundamental human rights in school practice.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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