

Concept of Inclusive Education and key elements

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During the past years, aspects of disability have been put under the microscope of the social model, which supports that disability is not an individual difficulty but a problem caused by barriers in society (Nind & Seale, 2009). Nowadays, inclusion is the prevalent educational policy for the instruction of students with disabilities or special educational needs in many countries (Ferguson, 2008) established in the argument that all students should have equal learning opportunities with the rest of the students in a 'school for all' (Keil, 2012). The notion of inclusion and its multi-level structure is high in the educational agendas and has led to many educational reformations. Clifton (2004) argues that "inclusion, and thereby participation, in the educational system, is more than simply access to education" (p77). Since inclusion refers to a wider community which embodies a number of cultural and linguistic diversities, educators have to strive to highlight the complexity of inclusion and encourage the development of an "inclusive ethos" accompanied with a flexible curriculum and classroom management (Clifton, 2004). This perspective has led to the necessity of changing classic techniques and strategies and reflect on collaborative networks conducted by teachers, pupils and researchers which seek to advance an agenda for inclusion bringing or conveying changes to institutional cultures and practices (Ainscow, Hows, Farrell & Frankham, 2003; Argyropoulos & Stamouli, 2006; Langerock, 2000; Lloyd, 2002; Schoen & Nolen, 2004).

At the same time, inclusive education challenges issues of classic pedagogy and as such leads to conflicts between different set of values and goals (Armstrong & Moore, 2004). According to Rodney (2003) inclusive education is not just a matter of inaugurating a new term in the educational terminology. It is a shift from one set of beliefs to another. Principles which are underpinned by notions such as empowerment, emancipation and equity are

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embedded in the context of inclusion and many times practitioners and their co-researchers confront dilemmas and difficulties (Armstrong & Moore, 2004; Thompson, 2004).

It seems that inclusion has two basic goals. The first one aims at the removal of all barriers that prevent participation and learning for students with disabilities and special educational needs; and the second one focuses on the detailed development of cultures, policies and methods in the educational settings in order to equip those students with skills that can be utilized inside and outside school (e.g. social skills) (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). However, it is crucial to mention that inclusion is not addressed exclusively to students with disabilities; on the contrary, all students, with or without disabilities, learn together in a flexible child-centred environment (Nutbrown & Clough, 2004; Wedell, 2005). In such a school framework, students are taught that all individuals are different but they can co-exist harmoniously from an early age since they belong to the same community (Wexler, 2009).

Generally speaking, three are the main models adopted for the inclusion of students in primary and secondary regular schools. The first model refers to the simple placement of the students with disabilities or/and special educational needs in the general classrooms without a particular kind of support. The second model refers to the usage of resource rooms which are located in general schools and a special education teacher is responsible for the students with disabilities or/and special educational needs who are enrolled in the resource rooms. The third one describes a context, which consists of two teachers in the same classroom; the general teacher and the special education teacher who is normally qualified in issues pertinent to special education. The theoretical perspectives of the latter model are underpinned by the notion of co-teaching or team-teaching, a teaching model that occurs when two or more professionals collaborate to plan, decide and deliver instruction to a certain number of students in the same physical place (Argyropoulos & Nikolarazi, 2009; Luckner, 1999). A co-teaching model allows general and special education teachers to share their skills and knowledge, to face difficulties and solve problems together enabling

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them in such a way to respond more effectively to the diverse needs of their students (Luckner, 1999), facilitate their access to learning (Jiménez-Sánchez & Antia, 1999; Kirchner, 1994) and as such promote “inclusive thinking”.

Inclusion concerns the notion of belonging, the right to have access and equal opportunities to get involved in all school activities. The basic requirements for a successful inclusion process are the quality advice, the advanced planning, the good teamwork and the preparation, which demand effective communication, team feedback and acceptance when things do not work well (Roe, Rogers, Donaldson, Gordon, & Meager, 2014). Other factors that contribute to the inclusion of students with disabilities and special educational needs are the healthy social-emotional factors which lead to the social development (Aviles, Anderson, & Davila, 2006), a sense of well-being, good social competence with peers, good school performance (de Verdier, 2016) as well as the legislative framework (Appelhans, 1993). In turn, the underestimation of the psychological consequences of the notion of disability, the lack of accessibility in the school area and activities, negative attitudes or lack of appropriate feedback from teachers and peers should be avoided (Hess, 2010; Roe, 2008). Apart from the relevant services and specialists, parents play an important role, since they convey information about their children, and provide continuous support and incentives, which motivate them to improve or not to improve (Sacks, Hannan & Erin, 2011). For example, Ajuwon and Oyinlade (2008), based on their research, concluded that most parents enrolled their children with visual impairments to typical schools for reasons related to the needs of parents themselves, while the rest preferred special schools taking into account the well-being of children and the quality of education provided. However, some parents refuse to cooperate with the school services because they have not yet accepted their children’s impairment (Kitsiou, 2015) or they are critical of the social situation in the schools (de Verdier, 2016).

Inclusion relates to a dynamic process by which the diversity of the students is respected and acknowledged during their education in their locality (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). On the other hand, many

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school systems are poor examples of inclusive education because they implement programmes without using a thorough and considerate planning process (Walther-Thomas, Korinek, McLaughlin & Williams, 2000).

All the above can be incorporated in a broader concept and that is the notion of the Universal Design. The implementation of the principles of the Universal Design is in line with the users' real needs irrespective of the environment (e. g. learning, technical, cultural, entertaining, etc.). The general policy of Universal Design was planned to respond to the widest possible audience with the minimum possible adaptations and the highest possible access (Stephanidis et al., 1998; Tokar, 2004).

In addition, the implementation of the concept of the Universal Design in terms of learning environment and learning procedures led to the notion of the "Universal Design for Learning - UDL" (Heacox, 2009). According to Heacox, the Universal Design for Learning incorporates trainees' (or students') readiness, interest, or learning profile, and also accommodates a variety of formal and informal assessments. By using the principles of UDL, educators and trainers can plan a "Differentiated Learning Programme" consisting of stages differentiating content, process, and product as well as learning environment. The more organised in terms of UDL a teaching process is, the more effective can be considering the differences in terms of participants' readiness, interest and learning profile (Broderick et al., 2005; Voltz, Sims, Nelson, & Bivens, 2005). Otherwise all "ex post" interventions will hardly succeed because of the absence of universal design elements (Hart, 1992). Finally, many researchers have conducted studies linking UDL to assistive technology and self-esteem which is worth taking into account in syllabus framework and educational interventions as well (Murray et al., 2004; Terwel, 2005).

Another influence which occupies chief role in the contemporary "inclusive evolution" is the influence of modern technology on society. Technology has influenced tremendously traditional schemes of instructional practices, curricula and

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workplaces. These findings have contributed to modifications of instructional methods and teaching strategies and as consequence teachers primarily and, students in return, have to be well versed in the growing body of this “new knowledge”. In our information-based society, this is a tremendous capability and provides unprecedented educational and vocational opportunities for students and people with disabilities and special educational needs (see for example Kelly, 2016). For example, Groff underlines the influential role of technology in school learning environments by stating:

Because of the invading character of technology in formal and non-formal learning environments, it is vital that all implementations should be incorporated in the notion of the Universal Design. A representative example constitutes a very recent study which has reported that digital barriers concerning the accessibility of university students with visual impairments, seems to affect negatively their quality of their university studies (Vojtech, 2016). A good practice would be to build the electronic environment in compliance with the universal design requirements – as mentioned above - adjusted to the specific needs of all students, indiscriminately (Vojtech, 2016).

The adoption of an inclusive educational policy in most countries created at the same time a fertile ground for the devaluation of special schools. Additionally, the environment in special schools is regarded restrictive and seems not to promote sufficiently their students’ social and communication skills (Mithout, 2016). For instance, special high schools in Japan have been defamed that they provided inadequate education to students with visual impairments, which resulted in a very low enrolment rate in higher education graduates (Mithout, 2016). However, this “image” was different two decades ago. For instance, Corn, Bina and DePriest (1995) administered a questionnaire to a great number of families who had a child with visual impairments asking to describe the advantages – if any - of special schools for the blind. Families praised the services, the exceeding resources and opportunities provided to their children, the qualitative instruction

and the most skilled staff compared to local schools. Families also expected their children to make more progress and have more opportunities in adult life through special schools.

On the other side, it has also been stressed that in typical schools children with disabilities do not receive appropriate instruction in order to a. actively participate in learning, b. have full access to the general core curriculum and c. acquire social skills (Hatlen, 2004). Despite the progress achieved in the name of inclusion, the shift in perceptions is rather slow (Hyder, & Tissot, 2013). Even nowadays, equal opportunities are refuted and students quite often face discrimination and exclusion, because of an amplified gap between theory and practice (Dyson, 2001).

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