



**48<sup>th</sup> session of the International Conference of Education (ICE 2008)**  
**Theme: “Inclusive education: the way of the future”**  
**A challenge to share**  
**Renato Operti**

**Abstract**

The 48<sup>th</sup> session of the International Conference of Education (ICE 2008) will have one of its main foci broadening the understanding of the theory and practice of inclusive education while discussing how governments can develop and implement policies in this regard. Traditionally, the concept of inclusive education has been circumscribed to definitions concerning predominantly students with special needs, however the concept is evolving towards the notion that children and young people should have equivalent learning opportunities regardless of their cultural and/or social backgrounds or differences in abilities and capacities.

The focus is on attaining effective integration through the generation of inclusive settings which imply, among other relevant aspects,: (i) respecting, understanding and ensuring diversity (education systems, schools and teacher mainly respond to the expectations and needs of students) and (ii) providing veritable equal access to a common type of education and curriculum framework in close coordination with other social policies. While informing the processes of educational reform in both developing and developed countries, inclusive education can be seen as a main strategy of addressing the sources and consequences of exclusion within the holistic approach of EFA together with the understanding of education as a right. The ultimate goal of inclusive education is to facilitate and democratize learning environments and opportunities for all.

**I. Institutional framework**

The International Bureau of Education (IBE–UNESCO) Council, composed of 28 UNESCO Member States, has decided to propose to the UNESCO Executive Council that the 48<sup>th</sup> session of the International Conference of Education (ICE 2008) should focus on the theme “**Inclusive Education: The Way of the Future**” and be tentatively held in Geneva between the 25<sup>th</sup> and the 28<sup>th</sup> of November, 2008. Under the general theme of inclusive education and assuming the UNESCO definition of inclusion as a reference framework (see point 3), four sub-

themes/workshops—which would be chaired by Ministers of Education—have been proposed to articulate the 48<sup>th</sup> ICE:

- (i) *Inclusive Education: Approaches, Scope and Content* (to broaden the understanding of the theory and the practice of inclusive education);
- (ii) *Inclusive Education: Public Policies* (to demonstrate the role of governments in the development and the implementation of policies on inclusive education);
- (iii) *Inclusive Education: Systems, Links and Transitions* (to create education systems which offer opportunities for life-long learning); and
- (iv) *Inclusive Education: Learners and Teachers* (to foster a learning environment where teachers are equipped to meet the learners' diverse expectations and needs).

The IBE Council visualizes the 48<sup>th</sup> ICE as an opportunity for promoting dialogue among Ministers of Education, highlighting some universal and complex issues, and engaging the audience. The ICE should play a pivotal role in orientating and clarifying the debate on Inclusive Education.

The IBE Council also proposes that the ICE should be based on evidence and involves the Ministers of Education in enriching discussions on evidence-informed policies.

This institutional framework provides a good opportunity to promote a worldwide discussion around Inclusive Education from an inter-regional perspective by pointing out and sharing common concerns and challenges as well as laying the foundations for road maps to move forward on the development of policy proposals agreed upon by the international community.

As a way of feeding the inter-regional debate, we discuss in this article four main issues: the role of Education as a right, the normative framework and Education For All (EFA) goals, sources of exclusion, and the concept and key dimensions of Inclusive Education. It can be better understood and visualized within a broader concept of education as a right and the wider international agreement upon EFA goals.

## **I. The role of education as a right**

Developed and developing countries are currently facing a common societal and worldwide challenge on how to foster and implement the right to education as concrete, feasible and perdurable opportunities and achievements for everyone to socially and individually grow and have a real chance at success in life. It is an all encompassing universal concept that contextualizes, orients, legitimates and gives content to the discussion of the key role of education in today's society. Moreover, at the same time, it contributes to overcoming a widespread educational vision that is essentially made by the aggregation of policies and provisions of inputs on the dimensions of access, retention and completion visualized as privileged ways of combating exclusion and disaffiliation from the education system.

The reports of the Commission of Human Rights provide a rich conceptual framework to promote thinking and collective action around the right of education. Katarina Tomasevski<sup>1</sup> has stated that “the right to education requires enforceable individual entitlements to education, safeguards for human rights in education and instrumentalization of education to the enjoyment of all human rights through education.” In complementary terms, Vernor Muñoz Villalobos<sup>2</sup> pointed out that the right to education should encompass the access of children and adolescents, with a strong emphasis on pregnant girls and adolescent mothers, of migrants, of autochthonous population, of minorities and of persons with different capacities.

Muñoz outlined core elements of a holistic approach towards the promotion and the protection of the right to education: guaranteed funding, free and compulsory education, the struggle against all forms of exclusion and discrimination, and the strengthening of the quality of learning solidly based on human rights. These elements should be part of a shared policy and action framework, and not be seen as measures that could be taken and carried out in isolation. Likewise, Rosa María Torres emphasized that the right to education implies the development of an education in tune with the times, the realities and the learning needs of persons in each context and moment (education as an alternative and as alterative)<sup>3</sup>.

When we discuss the right to education from a comprehensive and holistic perspective, we are analyzing in depth the role of education in society in at least five relevant dimensions.

- (a) Education as providing the conceptual and empirical foundations of democratic citizenship (awareness of as well as knowing and practicing the values, among others, of freedom, pluralism, justice, solidarity, tolerance, respect and excellence) by combining, making compatible and integrating universal, national and local concerns and responsibilities. Integration means understanding, respecting and promoting diversity and their multiple expressions by sharing and identifying with a common set of universal values and norms. The current discussion (for example in France) around the republican and liberal-cultural models of citizenship is illustrative of the tensions and conflicts as Ives Lenoir stated<sup>4</sup>, between a universal representation of values and norms based on a national political community, and the one based on being part of a community as a free and instrumental association of persons that share the same values and finalities.
- (b) Education as a key economic and social policy that visualizes fairness and competitiveness, equity and quality as complementary ideas and concepts in trying to forge conditions and opportunities for a better well-being. We should not refer to education as solely a social policy. Without a quality education equitably distributed from Early Childhood Education onwards, it is quite impossible to achieve sustained economic growth and a fair distribution of opportunities.

---

<sup>1</sup> Tomasevsky, Katarina. 2004. *Economic, social and cultural rights. The right to education. Report submitted by the Special Rapporteur, Katarina Tomasevski* Geneva: Economic and Social Council, United Nations.

<sup>2</sup> Vernor Muñoz Villalobos. 2004. *Economic, social and cultural rights. The right to education. Report submitted by the Special Rapporteur, Vernor Muñoz Villalobos.* Geneva: Economic and Social Council, United Nations.

<sup>3</sup> Torres, M. R. 2006. *The right to education is much more than acceding to school (original in Spanish). The right to education in a globalize world. Volume I (coordinated by L. M. Naya and P. Dávila).* Donostia: Espacio Universitario Erein. pp 43–58.

<sup>4</sup> Lenoir, Y. 2006. *Chapter I. Citizenship and multiculturalism, the terms of the debate (original in French). School and citizenship. A multicultural challenge (direction of Ives Lenoir, Constantin Xypas and Christian Jamet).* Paris: Armand Colin. Pp. 7–24.

- (c) Education as a generator and a facilitator of conditions that contribute to the reduction of poverty and marginality under a long-term vision, emphasizing its clear preventive nature. Historically, there has been a tendency to understand and circumscribe the role of education towards poverty situations as compensatory and remedial (for example school meals and health assistance focus on certain social groups) but mostly from the nineties onwards and principally related to developing regions (mostly in Latin America), the discussion's scope has been widened and enriched by referring to the concept of educability.

As Nestor López stated<sup>5</sup>, educability is a relational concept about the degrees of articulation between, on the one hand, suitable societal and family conditions for achieving an active participation in the educational process (for example access to minimum conditions of well-being as well as the socialization around values and attitudes that promotes and supports the significance of learning) and, on the other hand, the educational ones (for example, the school knows the characteristics and the expectations of its students and carries out adequate strategies in response to them).

The role of the government is a key factor for guaranteeing this articulation providing the needed links, interactions and feedback between the civil society, families and schools. The concept of educability serves to overcome a sort of social determinism mainly associated with enumerating lists of material conditions for the well-being, as well as placing specific responsibility in the capacity of the education system and of schools to understand students' diversities and provide alternatives aligned with them. Learning conditions and processes can only be developed if there is a minimum basis of educability.

- (d) Education as a crucial factor in facilitating a decent, proactive, intelligent and productive integration of national societies in a globalized world profiting from the opportunities and overcoming obstacles. It does not imply the fatalist acceptance of the world realities as non changeable and the adscription to international values and politically correct norms but quite to the contrary, the development of competencies linked to real-life situations that foster the critical analysis of reality as well as the capacity to understand and change it.
- (e) Education as a way of contributing to establishing solid bases for cultural and social integration through the sharing of common values and frameworks as well as developing policies and programs aimed at reducing wide disparities, gaps mostly rooted in gender, ethnic, migrant, economic, social and cultural factors. The gaps in outcomes as evidenced by PISA can be strong sources of exclusion and disaffiliation from mainstream society (as is the case of Latin American countries<sup>6</sup>).

---

<sup>5</sup> López, N., IPEE-UNESCO. 2005. *Educational equity and social inequality. Challenges to Education in a new Latin American scenario. (original in Spanish)*. Buenos Aires: OFFSET DIFO S.H. pp. 81–108.

<sup>6</sup> The international evaluation of knowledge and skills conducted by PISA/OECD in 2003 is clearly indicative of the considerable distance that separates Latin America mainly from European and to a lesser extent from Asian countries. For example, in the math test, which is meant to evaluate skills in relation to their application in daily life, the three participating Latin American countries occupy respectively the last (Brazil together with Indonesia and Tunisia), the penultimate (Mexico) and the antepenultimate

### III. Normative framework and EFA goals

Five international instruments—the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women<sup>7</sup> (1979), the Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>8</sup> (1989), the Salamanca Statement<sup>9</sup> (1994), the Dakar Framework for Action<sup>10</sup> (2000) and the Convention on the Right of Persons with Disabilities<sup>11</sup> (2006) are leading references in how countries approach and carry out proposals, policies, programs and practices around the right to education. It is important to acknowledge the existence of a solid international normative framework to move forward on a comprehensive vision around the right to education. We bear in mind that the diverse ways of interpreting and implementing these frameworks in each national context is a complex, healthy, logical and needed process. However, it should not imply denaturing and tergiversating the scope and the content of universal rights, many times justified under the umbrella of advocating and manipulating local cultural and social factors.

The Education For All (EFA) goals<sup>12</sup>, under a holistic approach and rooted in an enlarged concept of Basic Education comprising Early Childhood, Primary and Youth Education, is perhaps the more genuine and powerful commitment of the international community around the right to education, yet remains more of a pending challenge than a consolidated reality. Through the EFA Global Monitoring Report, UNESCO provides a solid reference for analyzing advances and identifying pending issues. As it is stated in the Report 2007<sup>13</sup>, “the overall EFA picture is mixed”. Progress has been made on expanding access to Primary Education (UPE), including for girls, but the target of achieving Universal Primary Education in 2015 is “unlikely to be met on time”. Likewise, there has been minimal attention to early childhood care and education (ECCE) as well as to the improvement of adult literacy.

The pending challenges around the attainment of EFA goals seem to indicate, among other things, the need of: (i) assuming and implementing in a more decisive way a human-rights-based approach which implies exercising and enjoying the right to education; (ii) better visualizing education as a public good based on an irreplaceable governmental mission and responsibility as well as its commitment in providing appropriate funds, conditions and opportunities for learning; (iii) developing a clear and explicit comprehensive agenda of educational change and policy

---

(Uruguay together with Thailand) places in a group of 40 countries. See OECD. 2004. *First Results from PISA 2003. Executive summary*. Paris: OECD. Table No.1, page 9. The region not only presents a situation of low global averages but also of wide variations within each country. For example, the Uruguayan PISA report shows that the students in the upper 5% of the points scale obtained an average of 2.8 and 2.4 times more respectively in language and maths than did those in the lower 5%. The same report indicates that “the best Uruguayan students have results similar to those of the best students from countries such as Denmark, Slovakia, Estonia and Switzerland”. See ANEP. 2004. *First National PISA Report 2003 Uruguay. Preliminary version—7 December 2004 (original in Spanish)*. Montevideo: ANEP.

<sup>7</sup> [www.unesco.org/education/pdf/WOMEN\\_E.PDF](http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/WOMEN_E.PDF)

<sup>8</sup> [www.unicef.org/crc/](http://www.unicef.org/crc/)

<sup>9</sup> UNESCO’S 1994 Salamanca Statement urged governments to adopt the principle of inclusive education and thus enroll children in mainstream schools. See [http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/SALAMA\\_E.PDF](http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/SALAMA_E.PDF).

<sup>10</sup> [www.unesco.org/education/efa/ed\\_for\\_all/framework.shtml](http://www.unesco.org/education/efa/ed_for_all/framework.shtml)

<sup>11</sup> [www.un.org/disabilities/convention/](http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/)

<sup>12</sup> The six EFA goals refer to the expansion of early childhood care and education, to the provision of free and compulsory primary education for all, to the promotion of learning and life skills for young people and adults, to the increase of adult literacy by 50%, to the achievement of gender parity by 2005 and gender equality by 2015, and to the improvement of the quality of education. See portal. [unesco.org/education/en/ev.php](http://unesco.org/education/en/ev.php) URL\_ID=42332&URL\_DO=DO\_TOPIC&URL\_SECTION=201.html

<sup>13</sup> UNESCO. 2006. *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007. Summary. Strong foundations. Early childhood care and education*. Paris: UNESCO.

reform linked to promoting and facilitating the right to access and to obtaining a high quality equitable education that is not driven by the agendas, visions, interests and demands of corporations and suppliers.

The current discussion in Latin America about a renovated agenda in Education is a good example of the progress being made. A recent declaration adopted by the Ministries of Education of Latin America and the Caribbean (Buenos Aires, March 2007<sup>14</sup>) represents a significant conceptual consensus on visualizing education as a human right, on the irreplaceable and unequivocal role of the government in achieving it, on the need of investing more and more effectively in Education and on understanding the professional development of teachers as a key foundation for the effective and efficacious development of policies.

In spite of these types of advances, the global picture indicates a worrisome reality concerning the effective implementation of the right to education:

- a. Insufficient consciousness, poor document-based information and lack of political willingness on the importance of prioritizing funding and the investment in Basic Education, from early childhood to youth education, as a key factor in promoting the development and well-being of national societies. The EFA report 2007<sup>15</sup> points out that “public spending on education as a share of GNP has decreased in forty-one countries since the 2006 Report”. Likewise, the report emphasizes that the “aid to basic education in low-income countries needs to at least double and to focus more broadly on ECCE<sup>16</sup> and literacy”;
- b. The maintenance of school fees impede the most socially deprived sectors from acceding to Basic Education. Tomasevski asserted that the elimination of school fees as a key strategy for girls, since fees victimize them more than boys, is an increasing global concern<sup>17</sup>;
- c. Growing expressions and behaviors derived from the spread of wars, violence, xenophobia, racism and intolerance at local, national and international levels;
- d. The existence of discriminatory visions, provisions and practices mainly related to gender, ethnic origin, migrant status and rural residence;
- e. The spread of diseases that, in certain cases such as HIV-AIDS, affect learners and teachers as well;
- f. Migration processes occurring inside and within regions and countries, and the difficulties of providing educational offers respectful and supportive of cultural diversities and endogenous knowledge as real sources of societal integration;

---

<sup>14</sup> See Regional Educational Project for Latin America and the Caribbean (PRELAC II), 2005. Buenos Aires Declaration (text [www.unesco.cl/esp/sprensa/1721.act](http://www.unesco.cl/esp/sprensa/1721.act) ).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. UNESCO. 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Early Childhood Care and Education.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Tomasevsky, Katarina. 2004.

- g. Unbearable cultural, social and education gaps between groups and persons—major consequences of high levels of poverty and marginality—which feed segmentation, isolation and confrontation as well as the widespread attitudes of resignation and fatalism towards accepting and reproducing the status quo.

It is clear that the international community needs to advance better and more rapidly in concretizing the right to education. There are plenty of comprehensive visions, feasible strategies, sound experiences and successful practices to share at national, intra and inter-regional levels, which can be fostered for example through the implementation of communities of practices<sup>18</sup>. Even more generally it is necessary to develop core universal concepts that help clarify orientations and pathways, deepen the debate on the most sensitive and complex issues, and stimulate a profound communitarian, curricular, pedagogical and teaching renovation of the education systems as a major shared challenge of the world educational community.

One possible way of addressing this challenge is to work around the concept of the right to an inclusive Education for All. The UNESCO Global Action Plan<sup>19</sup> for the period 2006-2015 clearly states that the six EFA goals altogether form the Basic Education agenda, which reaffirms the holistic approach well embedded in the conceptualization of the EFA goals at Dakar (2000). This implies a significant cultural and political change in the ways the education system and its interrelated parts are traditionally understood aimed at overcoming a segregated and insulated vision of each educational ladder or sub-systems which has been extremely harmful to students' learning opportunities.

Furthermore, the removal of institutional, pedagogical, curricular and teaching barriers between Early Childhood, Primary and Youth Education is a critical step in further democratizing Basic Education, not only by increasing enrolment and completion rates but mainly by ensuring real access to knowledge and competencies (a relevant and pertinent curriculum) based on a common educational policy and curriculum framework. If we tend to think of the EFA goals as essentially primary driven, we are severely damaging the possibilities of children and teenagers from poor households of successfully completing at least a nine-year basic schooling. In many societies, typically in Africa, we observe the coexistence of Primary for All and Youth Education for the few more culturally and socially equipped.

The sole consideration of access as the critical dimension of educational equality has proven insufficient and there is solid evidence of consistent and perdurable gaps between enrolment, completion rates and learning outcomes. Quite the contrary, the right to access to a quality education is much more than setting up the formal access to education, as it implies the acquisition of relevant knowledge and competencies as a solid foundation for the development of the child's personality and his/her possibility of living a satisfactory and enjoyable life within the society.

---

<sup>18</sup> For example IBE, in conjunction with curriculum specialists from different regions of the world, set up from 2005 onwards, the Community of Practice in Curriculum Development, which is understood as an open and plural worldwide space that contributes to generate collective thinking and action on curriculum issues within the framework of a holistic approach to determining and implementing the Education for All (EFA) goals.

<sup>19</sup> UNESCO. 2006. Education for All (EFA). *Global Action Plan: Improving Support to Countries in Achieving the EFA Goals. Edition of 10 July 2006. A basis for enhancing collective effort among the EFA convening agencies.* Paris: UNESCO.

#### IV. Sources of exclusion

The right to a high-quality equitable education implies significantly more than recognizing and addressing the negative impacts of societal contexts and how they are reflected and impacted upon in the education system. It is substantially concerned with the visions and practices generated from within and all across the different ladders of the education system. Many times social and pedagogical exclusion come along with an elitist school model whose main objective is to preferably suit the formation of elites for civil service and entrepreneurship functions. This is clearly the widespread vision and practice of solely visualizing Secondary Education as a trampoline for university studies.

Africa is a good example of this situation. At the same time that there is a growing recognition of the importance of enlarging Basic Education by at least three years of schooling (7<sup>th</sup> grade onwards) as a way of democratizing learning opportunities and increasing the equity and competitiveness of national societies. The curriculum of Secondary Education still often reflects an elitist vision which serves the interests and the needs of a minute minority. The traditional paradigm of education in Africa as described by Teeluck Bhuwanee<sup>20</sup> implies that lower secondary education is separated in institutional, pedagogical and curricular terms from Primary as well as from Technical and Vocational Education. It is visualized as a trampoline for tertiary studies, based on an outdated epistemological foundation and organization of areas of knowledge and on the role of teachers mainly as transmitters of information.

Although it is quite clear the significance of cultural and social factors in the explanation of high repetition and dropout rates as well as in low learning, skills and competency levels, they are also the consequence of a myriad of factors deeply linked to the education system:

- a. an endogenous vision of educational policy strongly closed to key stakeholders' visions, expectations and demands;
- b. a prescriptive vision of curriculum top-down very far from the school mission and classroom practices, and from conceiving the curriculum as encompassing processes and products as suggested by IBE<sup>21</sup>;
- c. the "imposition" of homogenous ways of teaching disregarding the different ways students understand and learn (the prevalence of the ideal student over the real one);
- d. the lack of schools and teachers as well of educational material supports to the teaching and learning processes (principally symbolized in textbooks);

---

<sup>20</sup> Bhuwanee, .T, UNESCO. 2007. *A strategic paper on the reform and renewal of Secondary Education in Africa. In Reforming Secondary Education in Africa. Proceedings of a regional seminar.* Addis Ababab, 21-24 November 2006. Dakar: BREDA. Pp. 17-46

<sup>21</sup> IBE. 2006. *Newsletter (on-line) Educational Innovation and Information. Curriculum as a way of attaining quality. Number 123. October 2006* ( [www.ibe.unesco.org/publications/innovation.htm](http://www.ibe.unesco.org/publications/innovation.htm))



- e. a worrisome miscomprehension of teacher’s histories, sensibilities, identities, beliefs and expectations as relevant key factors in the processes of curriculum change. Ivan Goodson (2006) has said that the key lacuna in externally mandated change (for example, driven by globalization and marketization as external forces to the education system) is the link to “teachers’ professional beliefs and to teachers’ own personal missions”<sup>22</sup>;
- f. teachers’ practices and rigid systems of students’ assessments that contribute significantly to expel kids and teenagers; the priority given to educate an elite for a competitive world over democratizing opportunities for all (the social status of the school, a discussion going on, for example, in developed countries);
- g. the impossibility of acceding to a learning process based on the students’ native language and on indigenous knowledge;
- h. the assumption that there is an international globalized model to follow that is “correct” (the risks of assuming and practicing an educational discourse in a black and white format).

Under different policy frameworks, objectives and strategies, the education system, its institutions and actors, can be and are potential key sources of social and pedagogical inclusion as well as of exclusion. Exclusion from the real possibilities of exercising the right to access and profit from a pertinent (take into account the learning differences that are related to the characteristics and needs of each person mediated by the social and cultural contexts) and relevant (the promotion of significant learning with regard to social exigencies and personal development) education is a major universal concern.

## **V. The Concept and key dimensions of Inclusive Education**

Inclusive education is a growing concern that informs the processes of educational reform in both developing and developed regions as a main strategy to address the sources and consequences of exclusion within the holistic framework of EFA goals and the understanding of education as a right. Traditionally and even today in different regions of the world (for example in Eastern and South Eastern Europe <sup>23</sup> as well as in the Commonwealth of Independent Countries –CIS-) the concept of inclusive education has been mainly circumscribed to the group of students categorized as having special needs such as (and predominantly) those with physical and/or mental disabilities and refugees. The approaches and responses have been essentially remedial and corrective, mainly by setting up differentiated structures, tracks and special schools. In many cases, one significant consequence of a differentiated curricular and institutional

---

<sup>22</sup> The University of Hong Kong, Comparative Education Research Centre (edited by Aaron Benavot and Cecilia Braslavsky), Goodson, I. 2006. *Chapter 12. Socio-historical Processes of Curriculum Change. In School Knowledge in Comparative and Historical Perspective. Changing Curricula in Primary and Secondary Education.* Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre. pp. 211–220.

<sup>23</sup> OECD. 2006. *Education Policies for Students at Risk and those with Disabilities in South Eastern Europe. Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, FYR of Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia.* Paris: OECD Publications

structure has been the segregation and isolation within the education system of those types of students categorized as having special needs.

The concept is evolving towards the idea that children and young people should have equivalent learning opportunities in different types of schools regardless of their cultural and social backgrounds or differences in abilities and capacities. The focus is on attaining an effective integration through the generation of inclusive settings which imply: (i) respecting, understanding and taking care of diversity (education systems, schools and teacher mainly respond to the expectations and needs of students) and (ii) providing a real equal access to a common type of education and curriculum framework in close coordination with other social policies.

Within a broader conceptualization of Inclusive Education, we mainly refer to students with disabilities, learning difficulties and disadvantages as it is conceptualized by OECD<sup>24</sup>. Although there are different categories to consider, the nature of the concept of inclusive education is non categorical. It is about providing effective learning opportunities to every child by respecting and taking care of its uniqueness and diversity (a tailored approach). Precisely UNESCO<sup>25</sup> defines inclusion “as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education” “It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children”.

Thus the design and the development of policies on Inclusive Education shouldn't be understood as the sum of initiatives and efforts towards specific groups (an endless list with the risk of forgetting some of them), and quite to the contrary, the focus has to be, as we have mentioned, on facilitating and on providing effective learning opportunities to every child in different types of schools, recognizing and respecting their diversities (change the focus from debates and frictions about which categories to include, to the provision of friendly learning environments and diverse learning opportunities for all). According to Rona Tutt<sup>26</sup>, the main challenge is to provide inclusive settings in all schools through the provision of a well diverse continuum of services that are part of a school network and by the articulation with other social policies.

Mainly from the nineties onwards, the scope, the objectives, the content and the implications of inclusive education have profoundly changed principally due to the recognition that the integration models solely based on incorporating students defined as with special needs into mainstream schools, principally applied during the eighties, are not well suited to respond to the diversities of learners' expectations and needs.

In some cases dropouts have increased among students with special needs as the result of applying integration models which are not based on a set of institutional, curricular and

---

<sup>24</sup> OECD. 2006. *Education Policies for Students at Risk and those with Disabilities in South Eastern Europe. Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, FYR of Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia*. Paris: OECD Publications

<sup>25</sup> UNESCO. 2005. *Guidelines for inclusion: Ensuring Access to Education for All*. Paris: UNESCO.

<sup>26</sup> Tutt. R. 2007. *Every Child Included*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing / The Association for all School Leaders (NAHT).

pedagogical changes. The restructuring and improvement of physical facilities as well as the provision of materials, is a needed condition but insufficient by itself.

One critical issue is how we understand the scope of integration, as supposedly based on a curriculum and school model that is the same for all students regardless of their differences (the students must adapt to the norms, styles, routines and practices of the education system), or quite to the contrary, it implies the conceptualisation and the implementation of a vast repertoire of learning strategies to precisely respond to of learners' diversities (the education system has the obligation to respond to children and youth expectations and needs).

Integration is essentially about providing friendly and effective learning opportunities for children and young people, and within this framework, inclusion is at the same time a guiding principle and a strategy to attain integration. This implies the need of addressing some core universal problems – principally high rates of non-school attendance, repetition, over-age and dropout as well as low learning outcomes - that undermine the functioning of the education systems. Different forms and ways of exclusion seem in fact to question their capacity to provide effective learning opportunities based on a rigid scheme of integration. Solely placing children in mainstream schools can establish a needed condition for integration but we are far from generating inclusive institutional and pedagogical practices all along the educational system.

On the one hand, we see how repetition, over-age, dropout and low learning outcomes intermingle so as to generate exclusion—empirical evidence clearly indicates that a student who repeats the first school years has a strong probability of dropping out in secondary education – based many times on pervasive and regressive institutional and pedagogical practices (for example to treat everyone as if they were equal in their learning conditions and capacities). On the other hand, exclusion, as it was said in the 2004 International Conference of Education<sup>27</sup>, implies the absence of professional and social competencies as well as the impossibility of acceding to essential knowledge so as to exert an autonomous and responsible citizenship.

The debate is not about the supposed dichotomy between integration and inclusion policies and models (as if we can integrate without including, or including without integrating) but rather how we understand and advance on the idea that each school has the concrete challenge of including everyone. This implies the articulation of a coherent and articulated set of policies, among other aspects: (i) a pertinent and relevant curriculum within a vision that facilitates dialogue among different levels of the educational system; (ii) a vast repertoire of diverse and complementary pedagogical strategies that can respond to the specificities of each student; (iii) available physical facilities and equipment aligned with the curriculum designed and implemented; (iv) strongly supporting the teacher in the classroom and seeing him/her as a co-developer of the curriculum and (v) engaging in dialogue with families and communities in order to understand their expectations and needs.

How to break the circuit of exclusion that has one of its key underlying foundations the repetition and dropout rates that occur in the first years of primary school? How to address the relationship

---

<sup>27</sup> UNESCO. 2004. *Internacional Conference of Education. 47<sup>a</sup> meeting. Workshops 2A y 2B Quality education and social inclusion*. Geneva: IBE/UNESCO. Annex XVI, pp. 8–14.

between an increasing universal access to secondary education and the subsisting elitist model that principally penalizes the deprived sector? How much do we respect, tolerate and empower school and diversity in children as a way of attaining greater inclusion? Which are the forms and contents, the explicit and implicit ones that feed social and pedagogical exclusion? What is the relationship between a prescriptive vision of curriculum and the processes of exclusion? Do low expectations of principals and teachers impact upon the learning outcomes of students?

The urgent need of advancing in truly democratizing the opportunities of acceding to and profiting from a quality education can be based on the conceptualization of inclusion as a central strategy in recreating and renovating the policies and programs around educational change. It is not solely a problem of understanding inclusion as mainly a sociological response to the traditional and structural problems of poverty as well as to the challenges of modernization and social and cultural integration.

Inclusive Education is increasingly a way of addressing other forms and contents of exclusion related, for example, to the social gaps in access to ICT, the marginalization of disaffected young people (those who do not study, do not work and do not look for work), the lack of educational opportunities for the migrant populations, the cultural homogeneity of those educational proposals that do not know, disdain and totally reject multiculturalism and to the stigmatization of cultural and social diversities as obstacles to integration.

From a societal vision, inclusive education is clearly and substantially linked to the discussion around the type of society and well-being as well as the quality of democracy we wish and pursue (a feedback relationship between education and society). It is based on the consideration of education as a central social policy which lays the foundations for an equitable development of the society under a long-term perspective.

Under this enlarged perspective, some central issues on inclusive education are related to i) the struggles against poverty, marginality, cultural and social segregation, exclusion and HIV-AIDS; ii) the consideration of cultural diversity and multiculturalism as both a right and a learning context within an universal framework of shared universal values, and iii) the safeguard of the rights of minorities, migrants, displaced and aboriginal populations.

From a strictly educational vision, an inclusive strategy implies the careful and detailed consideration of the specificity and uniqueness of each child and teenager so as to provide them a real educational opportunity throughout their lives. It is about the ways and the modalities under which teachers and students interact and generate mutual empathy and nearness, understand and respect their diversities and jointly create suitable and attainable conditions for achieving relevant and pertinent learning opportunities for all. Cognitive education plays a key role in achieving an inclusive education as it tends to make children aware of their own cognitive functions, which can help them to understand more and learn better.

In overall terms, the transformation of education in inclusive education <sup>28</sup> demands collective thinking and action on the concept of social justice, on the beliefs around the learning potentials

---

<sup>28</sup> British Educational Research Journal. 2005. *Thematic Review. Inclusive education: discourse and action*. Vol. 31, No. 2, April 2005, pp. 269–275.

of each student, on the conceptual frameworks that sustain good practices of teaching and learning and on endorsing a comprehensive political and technical vision of curriculum encompassing processes and products.

David Skidmore<sup>29</sup> conceptualizes the differences between the pedagogies of deviance and inclusion around five dimensions that are useful to position the debate:

- (a) educability of students – while the deviance discourse establishes a hierarchy of cognitive skills to place each student in a rather close way, the inclusion discourse highlights the open learning potential of each student that can be progressively discovered and stimulated;
- (b) explanation of the school failure – while the deviance discourse points out that the main learning difficulties are related to the deficiencies of the students' capacities, the inclusion discourse argues that the main difficulty lies on the insufficient responses generated by the curriculum;
- (c) school response – while the deviance discourse states out that the support to the learning process should be focused on the students' deficiencies, the inclusion discourse emphasizes the need of reforming the curriculum and of implementing a crosscutting pedagogy to the school;
- (d) theory of the teacher expertise – while the deviance discourse emphasizes the specialize knowledge of each discipline as the key element of the teacher expertise, the inclusion discourse highlights the active participation of the students in the learning process, and
- (e) curriculum model – while the deviance discourse argues that an alternative curriculum should be designed for those students categorized as low achievers, the inclusion discourse emphasizes the need of a common curriculum for all students.

At least five dimensions seem to be critical in organizing this thematic discussion:

- a. the significance and the priority given, under a long-term perspective, to Inclusive Education within the government policies, as a key social policy, and more specifically, as a powerful instrument to mitigate the negative effects of social and cultural disintegration as well as residential segregation (the cultural, ethnic, migrant and social composition of schools as a mayor challenge to the development of efficacious and efficient government social policies);
- b. the integration, diversification and navigability between the different ladders and pathways of the education system, the structures and the contents, within a global and unified vision of Basic Education as a way of fostering high quality equitable

---

<sup>29</sup> Skidmore. D. 2004. Inclusion, the dynamic of school development. London: Open University Press. Pp. 112-127

learning opportunities for all (the design of the curriculum in close relation to educational policy as a major source of democratizing opportunities);

- c. the individualization of the learning needs both of potential and current students (those who have never attended school, those who are currently attending and those who dropout) taking into account their cultural, social and cognitive diversities as well as their ethnic origin, their philosophical and religious beliefs and their migrant status, as a challenge and not an obstacle to work out a tailored approach towards providing a real opportunity of educational success to each of them (equality of opportunities policies shifting from solely access to also encompassing processes and successes centered on the diversities of learners' expectations and needs);
- d. the conceptualization and organization of the school as an integrated institutional and pedagogical unit that, within an solid educational policy and a shared curriculum framework from Early Childhood to Youth Education, facilitates, orientates, articulates and carries out efforts and initiatives aimed at generating suitable conditions for achieving pertinent and relevant learning (the school as the main driving force of educational change based on inclusive policies and practices); and
- e. the renovation and recreation of the teachers' role encompassing their ethical, societal and professional mission and responsibility, strengthening of the ways of understanding, approaching and responding to the differences between students and finally the need of revising, adjusting and enlarging the teaching styles aligned with cultural and social contexts that are increasingly complex and uncertain (teachers as co-designers and co-developers of inclusive policies at the school and classroom levels, and not as mere implementers of curriculum change).

In overall terms, Inclusive Education implies four key elements:

- a. it is essentially a process of looking for the most appropriate ways of responding to diversity as well as trying to learn how to learn from the differences;
- b. it is linked to stimulating, through multiple strategies, the creativity and the capacity of addressing and resolving problems by students;
- c. it comprises the right of the child to attend school, express his/her opinion, have quality learning experiences and attain valuable learning outcomes; and
- d. it implies the moral responsibility of prioritizing those students who are at risk of being marginalized and excluded from the school, and of obtaining low learning outcomes.