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**SDG 4- Education 2030 Agenda: A window of opportunity for inclusive education and inclusive teachers.**

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### **Introduction**

The commitment of the global community to inclusive education is acknowledged in the Sustainable Development Goal 4, ‘Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’, and in the *Education 2030 Framework for Action*. The document, which was approved by the international education community in May 2015 in Incheon, Republic of Korea, identifies inclusive education as one of the key factors for transforming education and education systems (UNESCO, 2015a). The impact of this on the lives of people and communities worldwide will be major. The hope is that this strong focus of the international community on inclusion will result to more attention being given to the promotion and implementation of policies and practices that will lead to fairer and more inclusive and equitable societies. In order for this to be achieved, it is important to revisit the notions of inclusion that up until today have permeated societies worldwide, hindering, sometimes, the possibility for inclusive and transformational practices.

As a starting point, it is important to highlight the complementarity of the concept of inclusion and equity. Indeed, if they were once considered as separate concepts, the new agenda stresses the fact that these two concepts go hand-in-hand and that they are both essential in addressing all forms of marginalization and discrimination (UNESCO, 2015a). This is true, not only in terms of access to education, but also once learners are in school, by focusing particularly on those groups of learners who are at risk of exclusion or underachievement (UNESCO-IBE, 2016). Within this new agenda, inclusive and equitable education policies and practices focus on the needs of all learners, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, and intellectual, physical and social conditions and provide them with

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<sup>1</sup> This text is based and built upon the article: Operti, R. 2017. Inclusive Education 2030: Issues and implications for Latin America. N. López, R., Operti and C., Vargas Tamez (eds). *Youth and changing realities: Rethinking secondary education in Latin America*. Paris, UNESCO. Likewise, we express our gratitude to Ms. Giorgia Magni and Ms. Ioanna Siakalli for their valuable contribution to the production of this paper.

personalized learning opportunities and learning environments, free of all forms of discrimination (UNESCO, 1994; UNESCO, 2015b).

In light of this renewed emphasis on inclusive education, as set out in the *2030 Education Agenda*, one daunting challenge lies in integrating, under a robust framework, four ideas that have been the compass for education policies on inclusion over the last 70 years (Operti, 2015; Operti, Zachary and Zhang, 2014). Namely, we are referring to the notions of inclusive education as (i) a human right and public good; (ii) the attention for groups with special needs; (iii) a priority for situations of exclusion and marginalization; and (iv) the hub of change of the education system. The synergies among these ideas can help countries in their efforts to address effectively the critical dimensions of inclusion, in order to reach the expectations and fulfil the needs of their diverse societies. Through these four ideas, countries will be able to harbour an integrated approach mainstreamed in the education policies and plans.

A series of tensions and challenges may arise in the attempt of countries to move forward with inclusion. Among these tensions is the false positioning of social inclusion against social cohesion, as well as the difference between diversity and disparity and the disconnections between educational reforms that are inputs-oriented and those that are oriented towards processes and outcomes. Additional tensions include the asymmetries and the complementarities between social inclusion and inclusive education, and between homogenizing and diverse universalism, respectful of diversities.

For its effective implementation, the renewed agenda for inclusive education will need to tackle a series of challenges. It will need to promote clear, targeted and sustainable public policies, while at the same time ensuring that stakeholders and institutions are convinced by inclusion. A truly inclusive curriculum catered for the diversity of all learners will need to be forged in the education system and schools should be visualized as proactive and open learning communities. Lastly, this renewed agenda will need to provide support to inclusive teachers, who understand and appreciate the diversity of all learners.

Crucially, the moral mandate and role of an education system is to empower, orientate and support teachers in their role as the classroom policy-makers, among other key functions. This requires revisiting the teachers' profile, role, competencies and dispositions as genuine drivers for inclusion. It also entails the need for policy-makers and educators to identify teachers as key actors of the education system and therefore engage them as active members in the education reforms (UNESCO-IBE, 2017). The final aim is to encourage teachers to be the

promoters of inclusion and equity in their classrooms and to encourage education systems worldwide to draw from teachers' practices to create policies that will remove all barriers that limit educational achievements.

### **Unveiling the notions of inclusive education**

In the last 70 years, and within an international comparative perspective, debates and policies on inclusive education have been permeated by four ideas that are serving as the lodestar of education proposals on inclusion. As we have previously mentioned, these ideas conceptualize inclusive education as: (i) a human right, a public good and, more recently, a common good; (ii) the attention to groups with special needs; (iii) a priority for situations of exclusion and marginalization; and (iv) the hub of change of the education system. These do not necessarily represent linear evolutions in time, but rather targets that constitute historical references and mark points of inflection in the meanings and purposes of education policies.

The first idea entails positioning inclusive education as the right for access to and enjoyment of appropriate and quality education, which leads to harmonious and full development of the ensemble of human rights. Since the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, 1948), education has been linked to the quest for social justice that entails, inter alia, responding to the purpose of education and generating a basis of consensus, among diverse stakeholders and primarily in learners and teachers, about the shared meaning of education. Furthermore, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNICEF, 2011) substantiates the right to an education that does not discriminate on the grounds of disability, ethnicity, religion, language or gender.

In terms of rights, education may be understood as a public good or, alternatively, as a common good (UNESCO, 2015c). The concept of education as a public good implies guaranteeing that each person can enjoy and benefit from the right to education. On the other hand, the idea of education as a common good implies that people avail themselves of their rights by intermingling with one another. The notion of a common good is essentially a political, socio-historical and cultural construct that recognizes diversity of contexts, points of view and national and local knowledge systems as the source of its legitimacy and development. The common good rests upon inclusive processes drawing upon a variety of institutions and stakeholders committed in formulating and implementing policies (UNESCO, 2015c).

The second idea is the understanding of inclusive education as fundamentally linked to the conceptualization of and attention to groups placed under the broad heading of special needs. Aligned with this notion, the *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* (UNESCO, 1994) marks a historic twofold milestone. On the one hand, it positions the discussion of inclusive education to the sociocultural aspects in the context of a comprehensive social reform of the State. On the other hand, it restricts inclusion to the incorporation of learners with special needs in mainstream schools and redefines the role of special schools as resource centres backing up mainstream schools. Perhaps one of the most significant aspects of the Salamanca Statement is that the document introduces the notion that the education system, and particularly schools, should adjust to the learner and not the learner to the school. Developments subsequent to the Salamanca Statement, chiefly the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations, 2006) and the *Conference 15 years since the Salamanca Statement* (Inclusion International, 2009), focus on the need for profound modification of the education system to meet the requirements of groups with special needs under the lifelong learning perspective.

The third notion focuses on inclusion of socially marginalized groups, strengthening and amplifying the Salamanca Statement. This is how, from the *Dakar Framework for Action of Education for All* (UNESCO, 2000) to the *EFA Global Monitoring Reports*, inclusive education has been gradually understood as the combination of fairness and quality, on the grounds that greater fairness of education systems ‘impaired’ the quality of education. On the other hand, the observation that fairness and quality go hand in hand changes the terms of the programme debate and, therefore, the construction and development of educational policies. The experience of the Nordic countries, and especially of Finland, shows that the most progressive education systems achieve, simultaneously, high standards of fairness, quality and excellence (Tedesco, Opertti and Amadio, 2013). The proof is therefore in how an education system prepares itself to marry fairness and quality, assuming the social and cultural context as both a challenge and an opportunity, rather than as a hindrance.

The fourth and final idea refers to inclusive education as the hub of change of the spirit and matter of the education system. Inclusive education entails harmonizing the reduction of inequalities that obstruct enjoyment of the right to education and learning, with understanding the diversity of expectations and needs of all learners as opportunities for extending and democratizing the learning processes.

The intellectual leadership exerted by UNESCO in establishing this transformational view of inclusive education has been fundamental. Firstly, in 2005, UNESCO conceptualized inclusion as a dynamic and positive-response approach to the diversity of pupils, moving away from the understanding that the growing diversity, equated to inequalities among learners, makes the classroom ‘ungovernable’. It therefore argues that it seems appropriate to separate pupils by sociocultural profiles in order to better cater their needs.

Secondly, during the *48<sup>th</sup> session of the International Conference on Education (ICE)* in 2008, organized by UNESCO’s International Bureau of Education (UNESCO-IBE), the representatives of 153 countries agreed in making inclusive education a general guiding principle for strengthening education for sustainable development, lifelong learning opportunities, and on the equitable access of all levels of society to learning opportunities (UNESCO-IBE, 2008). This broad concept of inclusive education shifts the focus of the format of education systems from learning goals and objectives to the subjects of learning. The obverse of assuming the diversity of each pupil as a learning actor is the personalization of education. This transformation involves recognizing that all pupils are special and thus need to be supported and strengthened through collaborative and interactive learning environments, and that, at all times, inclusive teaching underpins the monitoring of the learning process of each learner.

Thirdly, the *2030 Education Agenda* (UNESCO, 2015a) positions the concepts of inclusion and equity as the foundations of a systemic approach to educational quality, supported by the view that education transforms the lives of persons and communities. The two concepts are closely linked: while inclusion means giving effect to learning opportunities with regard to the diverse needs of all learners, equity involves guaranteeing that fair educational conditions, inputs and processes find expression in equality of purposes and outcomes for all learners. From this perspective, inclusion and equity inform a systemic concept of educational quality that entails interrelating and giving unitary meaning to the various parts of the education system with the aim of seeking to generate and facilitate learning opportunities.

The idea that amplifying the view and practice of inclusive education requires rethinking the purposes of education and the framework of organization and functioning of education systems arose after ICE 2008. Today, the *Education Agenda 2030* strengthens this appreciation and emphasises the need to rethink the concept of educational quality, incorporating the concepts of equity and inclusion to ensure visions and transformational education systems.

## **Tensions for moving forward with inclusion**

The implementation of policies regarding inclusive education illuminates the existence of a series of tensions. A first tension refers to the false opposition between social inclusion and social unity, from which societies displaying unity could be presumed to be immune to change. However, this is not the case, as inclusive societies need to be genuinely united, since unity without genuine inclusion is or favours the way to exclusion, or, indeed, excludes. Inclusion challenges unity in the twofold sense of achieving levels of politically and socially acceptable equity, while at the same time reducing significantly the equity and quality gaps in educational opportunities, because of cultural, social, gender and territorial conditions, among others.

A second tension, also of false opposition, is found between diversity and disparity. The policies and programmes seeking to mitigate the effect of the cultural and social barriers on learning processes are in danger of not fully encompassing the meaning or projection of inclusion. In order for initiatives to combat disparities, they should ensure, within unitary policy settings and taking into consideration curricular, academic and teaching aspects, that each learner is treated as a distinct and special being, and, thus, learns in a distinct and distinctive manner. Therefore, diversity entails understanding the ways in which individuals learn and supporting them throughout the learning process.

A third tension is concerned with the disconnections between the processes of educational change most oriented towards access and the conditions and inputs involved, or those most amenable to the processes and outcomes of learning. To a certain extent, it is a matter of defining the identity of change, as well as its significance, scope and implications. Education proposals need to be articulated in a way that learning conditions and inputs are transformed into authentic learning opportunities and real processes that lead to better educational results.

A fourth tension lies in the asymmetries and the spaces of complementarity between social inclusion and inclusive education. Inclusive education is, indeed, a tool for social inclusion but it can only operate effectively in a setting of complementarity with other social policies and as part of the triad territories – families – educational centres. Furthermore, inclusive education cannot be understood under approaches based on social determinism or voluntarism.

On the other hand, the education system bears the greatest of responsibilities: to provide every child – boy or girl – with the opportunity to learn, even in the most adverse contexts.

Social inclusion and inclusive education provide feedback to each other in a framework of complementarity within the whole range of social policies, which means that they need and strengthen each other mutually. Perhaps, the lack of enhanced interaction between policies on social inclusion and inclusive education could justify the disillusion and worries regarding the absence of a connection between efforts to improve investment and sustained improvements in learning processes and outcomes (Tedesco, Operti and Amadio, 2013).

A fifth and final tension arises between the homogenizing universalism and the inclusive and diverse universalism. Homogenizing universalism requires giving to everyone the same, based on the principles of equal opportunities that are associated with equal access. Inclusive and diverse universalism gives emphasis to the specific features of groups and persons, while maintaining universal values and references. One of the key challenges of educational policy seems to lie in moving beyond a model of thought and educational action seeking to foster equality while detaching itself from and, largely, ignoring the identities, conditions and styles of persons and groups. A further challenge lies in matching an educational conception that understands inclusion as a situation in which each group expresses itself in its own way without references and responsibilities vis-à-vis the collective of society. In both cases, it could also represent the variants of what could be understood as a crude form of relativism and multiculturalism.

### **Challenges for the renewed agenda for inclusive education**

The five orders of tensions described in the previous section emphasise the need to implement a renewed agenda for inclusive education. With this intention, this renewed agenda needs to take into account and tackle five challenges, which are described below.

Firstly, there is a requirement to conceive and elaborate public policies that are clearly directed, sustainable, of clear and substantive content, and long-term, where education is understood and practised as a cultural, social and economic policy. As already mentioned, the *Education Agenda 2030* provides a window of opportunity for rethinking the relationship between education and the whole range of social policies for forging fair and inclusive sustainable development.

Inclusive education cannot be a direction, a division, a unit, a dependency, an approach, a programme or a project and, even less so, a sum of these things. It should rather be the core, spirit and matter, as already mentioned, of public education policies. The temptation of having public policies oriented as a form of 'bypassing' the education system, or the issue of

introducing changes, is an effective way of isolating and weakening these changes and hence impairing their durability. Obviously, the aim is to alleviate the habitual 'political costs' without seeing how high the price is, as it fails a long-term educational vision and practice, an attribute that behaves as a hallmark of the most inclusive education systems.

The second challenge is for the renewed agenda to ensure that the institutions and stakeholders are convinced by inclusion, by generating appropriate foundations and strategies. Four stakeholders are crucial in this process. Firstly, the learners and their confidence in the value of the education proposal for helping forge their personal and social development, together with how close it is to their daily world of representations and experiences. Secondly, the teachers, whose representations and learning expectations of their students are one of the main factors of inclusion or exclusion of children and youth from educational opportunities. Thirdly, parents, tutors, caregivers and the community at large, who all need to be convinced by the education system that the training opportunities of their children are enhanced in heterogeneous learning environments. Finally, the political and social elites, who need to be convinced of the importance of living in an inclusive rather than an excluding society, calling upon an integrated and coherent range of moral, economic, social and political bases. The ethical argument is inescapable but not sufficient to convince nor to commit.

A third challenge is the need to go further into the concept of an inclusive curriculum built on a frame of common references, that is the profiles of those completing their studies, goals, contents, learning strategies and assessment criteria, among other items. This forms the basis for responding to the fact that each person is special and learns through interacting with others in collaborative learning environments. What also needs to be acknowledged is the fundamental role of assessment for the effective development of learning processes.

The requirement would then be not to adapt the curriculum in a way that detaches the learner from the collective fact entailed by education through individual educational plans, but to strengthen the collective spaces of learning. The latter should be a reference point for personalizing the learning process and generating synergies and instances of mutual support among peers, and between teachers and learners. The implemented curriculum should not be the sum of individual plans. It should instead comprise a broad range of strategies joined together in shared objectives, which respond effectively to the cultural, social and individual diversity of the learners.



The fourth challenge is for the renewed agenda to conceive schools as learning communities. As such, they rest upon the institutional and academic leadership of their principals and generate working conditions for teachers that permit collective collaboration and construction, and empower them to be effective decision-makers regarding the school curriculum of their institution. Working experience in networks and communities of schools and teachers, serving as both tutors and being tutored, is an aspect to be researched further. The leadership role of the State is strengthened when it is capable of getting very diverse schools involved in shared learning goals and strategies, and when it is able to foster spaces that seek to overcome territorial segmentations and the ‘categorization’ of schools. Such an example is the case of a Jewish Orthodox school in Manchester that acted as a tutor of a state school attended mainly by Muslims. In this project, there was a harmonious combination of the objectives of ‘learning to learn’ and ‘learning to live together’ promoted by UNESCO (Delors et al., 1996), the international community and the different countries.

Fifthly, education is the necessity to understand that the correlate of a school and an inclusive curriculum is an inclusive teacher, who understands and appreciates the diversity of the learners. This idea is expanded further in the following section, ‘The role of teachers’.

Lastly, a sixth challenge for the effective implementation of the renewed agenda for inclusive education is the need to create afresh the bases of trust and empathy between the world of young people and the world of adults, as a prerequisite for generating effective teaching and learning processes. The absence of this connection may be understood in light of curricular and pedagogical proposals that neither attract nor commit learners, and not so much as deriving from a supposed and manifested lack of interest of young people in education. The fact that young people may be bored at school does not mean that they fail to appreciate the value of education in their lives. In any case, it is equally important to understand the roots of lack of dialogue between generations and meetings between cultures, mainly because lack of these factors may erode any education proposal.

### **The role of teachers**

Teachers are fundamental actors of the education system, and hold the power to influence the education system to a great degree. Their importance has been reiterated in the *Education 2030 Framework for Action*, which states the necessity to ‘ensure that teachers and educators are empowered, adequately recruited, well-trained, professionally qualified,

motivated and supported' (UNESCO, 2016). Teachers have the ability to understand, appreciate and respond to the diversity of students' needs, not only the pedagogical needs but also the emotional, developmental and social ones (UNESCO-IBE, 2017). Therefore, teachers are essentially the ones who can determine the inclusion or exclusion of learners from educational opportunities. In order for them to become drivers of inclusion, we need to rethink teachers' profile, role, competencies and dispositions, as well as the 'assumptions and norms that dominate teaching practice' (UNESCO-IBE, 2017).

A first step in addressing this issue, is the need for the education community, especially for policy-makers and educators, to acknowledge the key role of teachers and thus, actively engage them in the education reform processes at large (UNESCO-IBE, 2017). Involving teachers in reforms means creating opportunities to foster dialogue among different education stakeholders and expanding the understanding of what really happens once the reforms enter the classrooms. This enables policy-makers and educators to gain awareness of teachers' cultures, frames of reference, and challenges. This could also help raise teachers' confidence in the system, as it should be remembered that teachers are usually sceptical about using methodologies and approaches that are not coming from peer practitioners (Opertti, 2017).

Inclusive teachers are those who understand and appreciate the diversity of learners. As briefly mentioned above, the role of inclusive teachers in bridging the gaps between the intended, implemented and experienced curriculum is crucial. In the cases where diversity is widespread and generates apprehension or doubts, it is likely that teachers become isolated and reject this quality, thus excluding any learner who does not fit the reference standards. Research on teachers working with excluded students has demonstrated that similar situations generate 'cycles of exclusion', in which both teachers and students remain trapped, creating a sense of deeper alienation from the system on both sides (UNESCO-IBE, 2017). In such contexts, teachers may see diversity in two ways: either as a factor that hampers both learning and teaching, or as an opportunity to generate more and better learning processes. In order for this to happen, teachers will need to act as guides and caregivers, and not just as providers of learning. For instance, if teachers are able to move towards a restorative relationship with excluded students, this can contribute to an improvement in the academic, emotional and social development of learners (UNESCO-IBE, 2017).

Teachers hold a key role in the way children, adolescents and young people learn and in helping them to become protagonists and regulators of their learning processes (OECD, 2013). Despite the irruption of new technologies, we should not lapse into naivety or any

fundamentalist posture of believing that virtual teaching replaces the teacher. Indeed, this practice, which is in place in many countries although partially, can be very dangerous, as it could put an end to the collective and interactive essence of learning. The curriculum will subsequently be curtailed, as there is a risk that it will become the property of mainly transnational institutions that obtain the rights or are the producers of online educational content. Under this assumption, the role of the State in a democratic society would be completely marginal in educating children, adolescents and young people for the society, citizen and individual pursued. Instead, the guarantor role of the State should be strengthened, so as to enable hybrid-learning models to generate more, better and fairly distributed educational opportunities for all (Opertti, 2017).

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