



## Improvement of directions for increasing the quality and efficiency of inclusive education in higher education institutions

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### ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is a process that involves the transformation of schools and other centers of learning so to cater for all children—including boys and girls, students from ethnic minorities, those affected by HIV and AIDS, and those with disabilities and learning difficulties. Education takes place in many contexts, both formal and non-formal, and within families and the wider community. Consequently, inclusive education is not a marginal issue, but is central to the achievement of high-quality education for all learners and the development of more inclusive societies.

### Keywords:

integration, inclusion, non-inclusive, vulnerable learners, specialist provision, professional development, services and institutions.

Education systems throughout the world are faced with the challenge of providing an effective education for all children, young people and adults. In economically poorer countries this mainly concerns the estimated 72 million children who are not in school. It is about high rates of repetition and drop-out as well as low learning outcomes that penalize the most deprived social groups. It is also about the 774 million adults who still lack basic literacy skills—more than three-quarters of whom live in only fifteen countries. Meanwhile, in wealthier countries—despite the resources that are available—many young people leave school with no worthwhile qualifications, others are placed in various forms of special provision away from mainstream educational experiences, and some simply choose to drop out since what is taught at school seems irrelevant to their lives. In both developed and developing regions there is a common challenge: how to attain high-quality equitable education for all learners.

**Integration** The concept of integration emerged in the 1980s, as an alternative to

segregated special needs curricula and school models, with the objective of placing students defined as having special needs in mainstream schools. The restructuring and improvement of physical facilities, the increase in numbers of special classrooms and special education teachers in mainstream buildings, the 'integration' of learners with special needs into regular classes, and the provision of learning materials were, and still are, some of the main components for the application of integration models. Mainly focused on students with mild impairments, integration can risk becoming a rhetorical device rather than a reality in practice; it can become more about a spatial change of school classrooms than a change of curricular content and pedagogy relevant to children's learning needs.

**Inclusion** Inclusive education can be understood as a guiding principle to attain reasonable levels of school integration for all students. In the context of a broader vision of integration, inclusive education implies the conception and the implementation of a vast

repertoire of learning strategies to respond precisely to learners' diversities. In this sense, education systems are required to respond to the expectations and needs of children and youth, considering that the capacity to provide effective learning opportunities based on a 'rigid' scheme of integration is very limited. This is what can be referred to as the placement paradigm;<sup>6</sup> that is, when inclusive education is conceptualized as a 'place' and not as a service delivered within the general education classroom as the continuum.

**Challenging non-inclusive practices** In order to become more inclusive, schools and other learning settings should pay attention to the development of 'inclusive cultures' and to the building of some degree of consensus around inclusive values within learning communities. Leaders should be selected and trained in the light of their commitment to inclusive values and their capacity to lead in a participatory manner. Learners who cannot easily be educated should not be seen as 'having problems'. Instead, the difficulties they face should be seen as challenges, which lead educators to re-examine their practices in order to make them more flexible and responsive.

**Support for vulnerable learners** Governments need to mobilize human and intellectual resources, some of which they may not directly control, if inclusive education is to become a reality. The involvement of the family is particularly crucial. In some countries, for example, there is already close co-operation between parents and authorities in developing community-based programmes for disabled children. A logical next step is for such parents to become involved in supporting inclusive education developments in high education.

The role of specialist provision Where countries have special schools or units attached to mainstream schools, it is likely that these will continue to make a contribution. As ordinary schools become more inclusive, the evidence is that the need for separate special schools diminishes and changes. Efforts are needed, therefore, to explore how the expertise and

resources within special schools can be re-directed in ways that will add support to the changes taking place in mainstream schools. Special schools can play a vital part in supporting ordinary schools as they become more inclusive. In some countries special schools have become resource centers, which enable clusters of schools to become more inclusive. The Salamanca Conference concluded that countries should concentrate their resources on developing inclusive ordinary schools. Such moves open up new opportunities for special school staff to continue their historical task of providing support for the most vulnerable learners in the education system.

**Continuing professional development** For all countries, teachers are the most costly—and the most powerful—resource in the education system. As systems become more inclusive, professional development is particularly important because of the major new challenges that face both ordinary school-teachers—who have to respond to a greater diversity of student needs—and special educators—who find the context and focus of their work changing in major ways. Professional development needs to be seen as part of a whole-system approach to change. Teacher trainers may need opportunities for reorienting their role, particularly where mainstream and special education training have traditionally been separate from each other. The development of the teaching force is crucial, particularly in countries where material resources are relatively scarce. The key issues for professional development are as follows:

- Special educators need to develop a new range of skills in consultancy, the mainstream curriculum, inclusive classroom practices and so on—since, in an inclusive approach, they spend more of their time working in ordinary schools and supporting teachers.
- Teacher-training programmers have to be organized on inclusive lines. The rigid separation between mainstream education and special education programmers has to be replaced by more integrated programmers or more flexible pathways through programmers.

•Teacher trainers themselves have to understand inclusive practice. They have to develop a greater knowledge of mainstream education and, in particular, the sorts of practices that are appropriate in inclusive classrooms. •Initial and in-service training have to provide opportunities for reflection and debate on inclusive approaches—since they are based on sets of attitudes and values as well as on pedagogical knowledge and skills.

Co-ordinating services and institutions In many countries, education systems and their administration are themselves barriers to inclusive practices. Often special and mainstream education are administered through different departments or teams, with different decision-making processes, regulations, funding arrangements and so on. Co-ordinating existing services and interest groups is an essential first step towards inclusive education. Civil society and international organizations can play a role in the transition to inclusion by helping to align national developments with current international trends; providing access to international expertise and experience; working at the national level with ministries in formulating inclusive education policies; supporting inclusive education projects with advice and resources in order to catalyze national developments; and supporting the implementation of national inclusive education policies.

**Conclusion:** Incorporating inclusion as a guiding principle requires important changes and shifts in education systems, as well as at the societal level, and this change process is frequently faced with several challenges. Typically, these include: discriminatory attitudes and beliefs; lack of understanding; lack of necessary skills; limited resources; and inappropriate organization. Accepting change is really about learning. It means that schools should foster environments where teachers learn from experience in the same way that they expect their pupils should learn from the tasks and activities in which they are engaged. Teachers who regard themselves as learners in the classroom are more likely to successfully facilitate the learning of their

pupils. There are several important elements that contribute to successful change, in particular: clarity of purpose; realistic goals; motivation; support; resources; and evaluation. The move towards inclusion is a gradual one that should be based on clearly articulated principles, which address system-wide development. If barriers are to be reduced, policy-makers, educational personnel and other stakeholders need to take certain steps which must involve all members of the local community, local education offices and the media. Some of these actions include: mobilizing opinion; building consensus; reforming legislation; carrying out local situation analyses; and supporting local projects. Finally, it is also important to recognize that some dimensions of change can effectively be measured. Such measurements include: direct benefits to learners; wider impact on policies, practices, ideas and beliefs; enhanced learners' participation; reduced discrimination (e.g. gender, disability, minority status, etc.); strengthened partnerships and improved collaboration between ministries, at the national and local level of government as well as at the community level; and development and strengthening of the education system, technology and pedagogy to include all learners. 14 UNESCO, Guidelines for inclusion: ensuring access to Education for All, Paris, UNESCO, 2005.

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