INCLUSIVE EDUCATION WITH A COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH

Abstract

The education system and its ecosystem – with its many stakeholders and ramifications – is an essential resource for strengthening processes of social inclusion in contexts of significant cultural diversity caused by growing international migration. There is therefore a need for greater openness and permeability towards its social and local frame of reference: the community should know how to identify and capitalise on the opportunities offered by more inclusive approaches to education on all levels. The intercultural approach explores the value of relationships and constantly reframes the collective identity, built from multiple contributions, with diversity itself one of its central pillars. Such intersections are beneficial, with a noticeable impact on schools and in their respective contexts. This is particularly so if initiatives are long-term and structural as well as developed in such a way that they encourage participation and transformative processes

1.   International migration is a global phenomenon. Its recent intensification and diversification have given rise to renewed and complex challenges for societies, in countries of origin, transit and destination. These challenges often arise in local contexts, and at times bear little relation to the primary causes of migration. Yet they are affected by its numerous consequences and implications, and the sphere of social cohesion and harmony bears the brunt of its impact, particularly where new arrivals settle in large numbers.

2.   The increasingly multicultural nature – and greater social complexity – of many local contexts needs to be addressed through what is commonly termed *management of cultural diversity*. The aim of this approach is to strengthen integration processes and create general contexts of social inclusion in which people may find answers to their many needs and aspirations. Some systems that have broad social reach in local contexts may contribute effectively and meaningfully to the development and consolidation of these processes; the education system is a case in point.

3.   In fact, one of the keys to effectively bringing this new social reality into being, promoting greater diversity in the local context – although potentially applicable on a wider scale or geographical scope – is the openness and the function of education systems. Particularly when we consider the vast connections between education systems and a large number of institutions and stakeholders, both public and private: from government to the family unit, including citizens and the organisations that represent them, social organisations and systems such as public healthcare or the welfare system, the bodies tasked with meeting employability and employment requirements, etc.

4.   The educational community is a complex and dynamic body, composed of direct participants – students and teachers – plus support staff and managers at different institutional levels, and families with a greater or lesser degree of organisation and involvement (e.g. parent–teacher associations). It therefore interacts constantly with numerous stakeholders, or could do so, as has already been pointed out, and is able to have a major impact on its social environment, playing a vital role in its transformation and improvement.

5.   This ability to influence is acquired over time if the system and each of its nodes are successfully introduced to the reality of the social setting – of state schools directly, and progressively of publicly funded private schools (*colegios concertados*) and private schools – particularly with a community-based approach and as a way of designing inclusive strategies that address diversity from an intercultural perspective. A community-based approach creates the permeability required for inclusive social projects with the participation of all those involved, building on the foundations established by educational establishments on all levels, from schools to higher education.

6.   The intercultural perspective promotes progress towards the establishment of multidirectional relationships in scenarios of tolerance, thus overcoming hostile environments or contexts of insufficient inclusion, as Carlos Giménez would contend. Interculturality is a paradigm for the construction of new collective realities and renewed identities. It manages to combine all original contributions without divesting them of their identifying features, highlighting the value of diversity as a lever of progress and change that draws on a multiplicity of experiences: *strength through diversity*.

7.   What neighbourhood or town does not have a school in its immediate vicinity? Education is a system that, in many places fully or significantly, caters to the local social context. It branches out from centres or nodes that become potential hubs radiating outwards into the environment, reaching a large part of the population, through families, and the community – a broader and more complex concept than the former – if it succeeds in becoming a benchmark for further progress in areas of maximum social interest, as is the case with social inclusion. It is a system that also has the ability to incorporate new elements almost immediately, due to its relationship with them through schooling or the ongoing training needs of people.

8.   These new elements may be newly arrived people and families, the new manifestations of diversity expressed through ways of life and customs, cultures and forms of relationship, ideas and learning experiences or ways of understanding reality and future development. They all fit together in a context of understanding, respect and shared construction, which is essential if this combination of elements is to bear fruit. We return, therefore, to the premise of permeability, to the building blocks of inclusive and enduring structures that are constructed chiefly through the educational sphere, capitalising on the central role that it occupies in people's lives, sometimes for an entire lifetime.

9.   This means strengthening the openness and connections of the system in dynamic environments, which often evolve at a pace that is not easy to follow, but for which it is necessary to be prepared and to prepare others. This is achieved by harnessing the comings and goings of knowledge, ideas, resources, proposals and intentions. Contributions become indispensable ingredients in the development of transformative strategies, from the personal to the collective, always moving towards the community. Strategies that inspire educational projects that go beyond the classroom and the school. Their frame of reference is the local social context in which the educational community is framed, and – why not – the places of origin and transit of the diversity found there: the complex shared reality.

10.   It seems that considerable progress has been made in the creation of inclusive educational contexts, promoting strategies and projects that sow the seeds of tolerance and help it to flourish, but that does not always lead to processes that reach beyond the school walls. While this progress is significant, it is not enough, and the potential that needs to be harnessed to fully adapt the social context is largely wasted. That is where the fundamental challenge lies: transcending from the personal to the collective, from the particular to the general, from the sectoral to the global, as Marco Marchioni might argue. From the classroom to the street.

11.   How? Without diverting attention *inwards*, we must also look *outwards* and consider the local social context. We should start by identifying other dynamics, processes or specific initiatives that are being developed. We need to learn from them and make use of them if they align with our goal of inclusion. The educational community will therefore need to assume new *functions* so as to carry out this task of identification, understanding and agreement, with the intention of defining new strategies that are shared by an increasing number of stakeholders. Strategies designed to transform and that are therefore enduring and sustainable are necessary.

12.   Sustainability will be achieved through a concerted, network approach. The strategies should be participatory and inspired by general principles that participants can easily grasp as processes. They may, for example, be based on the sustainable development goals (SDG), which could provide us with solid arguments to strengthen our proposal and to bring about a positive change in people and in the planet: quality education (Goal 4), cities and human settlements that are inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable (Goal 11),

just, peaceful and inclusive societies (Goal 16), partnerships for achieving these goals (Goal 17). An important repository of keys for deciphering the world.

13.   We are talking about new *functions* assumed within the educational sphere to identify needs and opportunities related to inclusion and related matters in the local social context. It is a task that may be carried out by a growing number of stakeholders from the educational community itself, and will enable reality to be scrutinised from a generous and inclusive vantage point. This perspective will give deeper insight to teachers and management teams – who should increasingly reflect existing diversity – and students and families, as well as institutions with a stake in the future of education. The intersectionality of these various stakeholders and their perspectives is significant and can allow for more dynamic and realistic insights if considered together.

14.   Tying in with the idea of permeability mentioned above, our proposal requires more spaces for meetings and for building relations between the educational community and society; spaces and structures that facilitate, motivate and even mediate. On the one hand, this will entail increasing inclusivity of schools, including the possibility of making them focal resources for the community in a way that is compatible with their educational function. On the other hand, it calls for the projection of educational dynamics into the community, not as specific events, but as a habitual practice that extends their development framework towards public spaces, community centres, cultural venues, neighbourhood facilities, etc.

15.   This continuous two-way exchange will produce a wide array of impacts, inwards into the education system and outwards into the community, towards the people who are directly involved (individuals) and towards society as a whole (including institutions). This is the goal and, at the same time, the benchmark for other systems that should also undertake a similar journey, since there needs to be cross-sector convergence promoting a more comprehensive and integrated vision of reality; a vision that is inclusive of existing diversity as a strategy for fostering inclusion in contexts of diversity.

16.   Among the impacts or effects, those that stand out are those that affect institutions and the educational process across the different levels and phases. Significant impacts and effects include lessons to be learnt about the main social challenges, educational institutions that are more committed to their community, producing a significant improvement in perceptions and even in their reputation, more intervention opportunities for members of the educational community, who can actively participate in the strategies that are defined and also, the addition of experiences that are gratifying and motivating because they connect with the real needs and aspirations of people and organisations.

17.   In short, inclusion and attention to diversity cannot be achieved through an exclusive focus on teaching tolerance in schools if the focus is disconnected from the local social context of the school. In order for these processes to be fruitful, we must fully consider what motivates people as well as their *everyday lives*, which go beyond the time they spend in schooling or training. Only with this consideration can we then begin to *dream* of incorporating their realities and personal experiences, which would coincide with wider geographical contexts and timeframes. By utilizing this knowledge, we will bring the education system into contact with its community, which will also require models of reference and a secure foundation to guide the overall process of inclusion, combining efforts across sectors. The education system can be the key promoter of this process, but it must be prepared for it.

About the author

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Key local projects in which the author has participated in recent years, and that are related to the subject matter of this paper:

- 'Intervención experimental en materia de empleabilidad en Comunidades Educativas' y 'Fomento de la empleabilidad de personas desempleadas en el entorno de las Comunidades Educativas' (ICE) *("Experimental Intervention for Employability in Educational Communities" and "Promoting the Employability of Unemployed People around Educational Communities")*

- Proyecto Barrios por el Empleo: Juntos más Fuertes ("Neighbourhoods for Employment: Stronger Together"), http://bxe.es

- 'Escuela Abierta de Verano Yo soy Taco' *("Yo Soy Taco Open Summer School")*

- 'Programa social de apoyo familiar al éxito educativo' *("Social Programme of Family Support for Educational Success")*

- *Proyecto Intervención Comunitaria Intercultural (ICI Taco) ("Intercultural Community Intervention: Taco"),* **Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.**

- 'Grupo de Trabajo de Educación para el Desarrollo' *("Education for Development Working Group")*

- 'Grupo de Trabajo de Participación Infantil Amiguitos y Amiguitas' *("Amiguitos y Amiguitas Child Participation Working Group")*

- *Proyecto Juntos En la misma dirección ("Together in the Same Direction"),* http://www.juntosenlamismadireccion.com

- 'Análisis de la realidad del CEIP Guayonge y propuestas de actuación a partir de las aportaciones de la comunidad educativa (2016-2017)' *("Analysis of the reality of Guayonge Primary School and action proposals based on the contributions of the educational community (2016-2017)")*

- AMPA Guayonsete and CEIP Guayonge, Tacoronte, Tenerife, Canary Islands