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THE 'INCLUSIVE BIAS' OF THE ABLEIST APPROACH IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

El 'sesgo inclusivo' del enfoque capacitista en la educación inclusiva

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ABSTRACT

Educational inclusion is an issue of increasing concern in different areas and levels. However, no matter how many advances have been made to achieve full educational inclusion of students, it will always continue to involve the same problem: the fact that some include and others are included. Therefore, this article will reflect on some of the major problems presented by the inclusive education paradigm. Among them, it will present, first, what has come to be called "inclusive bias", referring to the ableist approach that prevails in the background of the inclusive paradigm, which continues to be built on the abilities of students and labels them based on

them, conditioning and weighing down their inclusion. Second, it will examine the rupture that occurs between the theory and practice of inclusive education, hindering its proper implementation and instead promoting actions of a segregating nature. And, thirdly, it will address the ableist language that predominates in this model to refer to human differences, fostering negative beliefs, attitudes and stereotypes about diversity. Finally, and in order to evolve towards a holistic educational model that makes it possible to overcome the problems presented by the inclusive model, it is proposed to advance towards the full normalization of diversity and it is claimed a true school for all, without exceptions, which: offers a fair, equitable and quality education for each and every one of the students, is based on a critical pedagogy, works as a learning community and offers a universal design of learning that facilitates the response to the personal educational needs of each student to fully develop their individual potential.

Keywords: inclusive education; inclusion; disability; special needs; educational discrimination; school segregation; educational opportunities; social justice.

RESUMEN

La inclusión educativa es una cuestión que preocupa cada vez más en diferentes ámbitos y niveles. Sin embargo, por muchos avances que se hayan pretendido realizar para lograr una inclusión educativa plena del alumnado, esta siempre seguirá comportando el mismo problema: el hecho de que unos incluyen y otros son incluidos. Por ello, este artículo reflexionará sobre algunas de las grandes problemáticas que presenta el paradigma de la educación inclusiva. Entre ellas, presentará, en primer lugar, lo que se ha venido a denominar como «sesgo inclusivo», referido al enfoque capacitista que prevalece en el trasfondo del paradigma inclusivo, que continúa erigiéndose sobre las capacidades del alumnado y lo etiqueta en función de ellas, condicionando y lastrando su inclusión. En segundo lugar examinará la ruptura que se produce entre la teoría y la práctica de la educación inclusiva, dificultando su adecuada implementación y promoviendo en su lugar acciones de carácter segregador. Y, en tercer lugar, abordará el lenguaje capacitista que predomina en este modelo para aludir a las diferencias humanas, fomentando las creencias, actitudes y estereotipos negativos que se mantienen acerca de la diversidad. Por último, y a fin de evolucionar hacia un modelo educativo holístico que permita superar las problemáticas que presenta el modelo inclusivo, se propone avanzar hacia la normalización plena de la diversidad y se reclama una verdadera escuela para todos, sin excepciones, que: ofrezca una educación justa, equitativa y de calidad para todos y cada uno de los alumnos, tome como base una pedagogía crítica, funcione como una comunidad de aprendizaje y ofrezca un diseño universal de aprendizaje que facilite la respuesta a las necesidades educativas personales de cada estudiante para desarrollar al máximo su potencial individual.

Palabras clave: educación inclusiva; inclusión; discapacidad; necesidades educativas; discriminación educativa; segregación escolar; oportunidades educativas; justicia social.

1. INTRODUCTION

Educational inclusion is an issue of growing concern in different areas and at different levels, even becoming a political, propagandistic, media and social objective. No matter how much progress has been made to achieve the full educational inclusion of students, it will always involve the same serious problem, intrinsic to its very nature and definition; that is, the fact that some 'include' and others 'are included' (usually people with disabilities and other minority groups). Thus, this approach is precisely the one that, paradoxically, keeps alive certain segregating practices and actions to achieve its goal, which, in turn, generate structural discrimination that renders people with disabilities invisible and legitimises and even denies the existence of such oppression against them (Student Council of the University of Malaga, 2019). In fact, this discrimination seems to be on the rise (Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund [LCCREF], 2009), driven by distorted assumptions and beliefs about disability (Wallace, *et al.*, 2003).

In this regard, people with disabilities are often portrayed as an invisible (Dunn, 2019) and marginalised minority group, which has suffered a long history of violence, oppression and discrimination (Keller, & Galgay, 2010). Specifically, in Spain, people with disabilities have been and continue to be victims of various forms of discrimination and restrictions to their enjoyment of and access to rights, education, work, information and services, as evidenced by numerous research papers and reports (e.g.: Ministry of Economy, Finance & Employment, 2021; de Cabo *et al.*, 2003; de Ortúzar, 2018; García, *et al.*, 2021; Gutiérrez, *et al.*, 2021; Hernández, & Millán, 2015; Huete, 2013; Huete, & Pallero, 2016; INE, 2017, 2021; Moral, *et al.*, 2020; Moral, 2021; *Observatorio sobre Discapacidad y Mercado de Trabajo en España*, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021; *Observatorio Estatal de la Discapacidad*, 2021; United Nations [UN], 2017, 2018; Otaola, & Huete, 2019; Pascual, 2016; Ramiro, & Ramírez, 2021; Rodríguez, & Cano, 2015; *Servicio Público de Empleo Estatal*, 2019, 2020, 2021; Silván, & Quíñez, 2020, 2021; Valle, 2020; Villa, 2003).

These discriminations and restrictions are compounded by the bias, prejudice and ableism that permeates the thinking of our society and operates as a discourse of power and domination broadcast at numerous levels. It is therefore imperative to raise awareness among the population that such acts and attitudes are not, under any circumstances, acceptable (LCCREF, 2009). And in this respect, education plays a key role, since the educational environment is one of the contexts in which ableism is most evident (Rodríguez, 2021), especially in relation to the inclusion of students, producing a false dilemma between the objective of fostering the maximum personal development of each student and the differentiating action to be taken to achieve it (Del Pozo-Armentia, *et al.*, 2020).

Therefore, this article will first address the various problems posed by the paradigm of inclusive education, and then propose and call for a holistic educational model that is anti-ableist, critical and personalised, in order to contribute to the achievement of a true school for all and the full normalisation of diversity.

2. PROBLEMS OF THE INCLUSIVE PARADIGM

2.1. *The "inclusive bias"*

As already mentioned in the introduction, the inclusive education paradigm has an implicit problem that could be defined as "inclusive bias", since in order for some to 'be included' it is necessary for others to 'include', thus perpetuating discrimination and the risk of exclusion of those who are deemed to need to 'be included' and sustaining the power of those who can (or cannot) 'include' them. In short, it could be argued that the "inclusive bias" reflects an ableist approach that underlies the paradigm of inclusive education and therefore prevails in current Spanish educational legislation; since despite the fact that Act 3/2020, of 29 December, which amends Act 2/2006, of 3 May, on Education (LOMLOE, 2020) seeks to shift the focus on to the needs of each student, it is actually still based on the psycho-pedagogical diagnosis of students who show certain difficulties and who are labelled as "students with specific educational support needs" and even, within this, as "students with special educational needs" (LOMLOE, 2020). In other words, it actually continues to be based on students' abilities and labels them accordingly, perpetuating an ableist perspective on students, which affects and hinders their full inclusion (García-Barrera, 2017).

The same is true of the Spanish Disability Strategy 2012-2020 (Government of Spain, 2021), which established the importance of ensuring that children with disabilities are properly integrated into the mainstream education system with the necessary individual support. To this end, it proposed the following strategic lines of action: promoting the early detection of 'special educational needs', strengthening the ongoing training of teachers and promoting inclusive education at all educational stages with the necessary support (Cano, & Rodríguez, 2015). However, the new roadmap of the Spanish Disability Strategy 2021-2030 will pursue the same objective, in line with the European Union (which has adopted a similar EU-wide framework for the same period, called "NextGenerationEU") (European Commission, 2020) and the Spanish Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan (Government of Spain, 2021). This is because available statistics show that, despite the "high percentage of educational inclusion, there is a discriminatory structural pattern of exclusion and segregation towards students with disabilities, which is based on an ableist mentality" (Rodríguez, 2021, p. 9).

2.2. *Rift between theory and practice*

Another major problem with the inclusive paradigm is its implementation, as there is a wide rift between its definition at a theoretical level and its expression at a practical level (Álvarez-Álvarez, 2013), and it seems to be forgotten that the success of inclusive education does not lie in the mere presence of students with disabilities in mainstream schools.

According to the latest available data from the National Institute of Statistics, for the academic year 2019-2020, there are a total of 8,286,603 students enrolled in mainstream education in Spain, of which only 38,068 are in special education: 27,384 in specific special education centres and 10,684 in special education units in mainstream schools.

On the other hand, according to data from the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (MEFP) for the same academic year (2019-2020), the number of "students with specific educational support needs" enrolled in regulated non-university education would amount to 18.3 % (730,100 students), 9.0 % would receive special educational attention (745,794 students), and 2.3 % would receive educational support in mainstream schools because they have "special educational needs" (a total of 183,725 students). Of the 18.3 % of students "with specific educational support needs", 30.4 % (221,792 students) would have "special educational needs", representing 2.7 % of the total number of students enrolled in regulated non-university education (MEFP, 2021).

Therefore, in Spain, only 0.4 % of students would be enrolled in special education courses, compared to 9.0 % who would be enrolled in ordinary centers receiving "different" attention from ordinary and 7.3 % who would find, supposedly, "included" and cared for in an "ordinary" way.

All these data highlight two important issues: the first and foremost is the fact that the current inclusive paradigm continues to label students according to supposed 'specific educational support needs' or 'special educational needs'. This, again, would be linked to the 'inclusive bias' explained in the previous section, as such labelling discriminates and distinguishes them from other learners, based on an ableist approach and hindering their possible inclusion on equal terms. And the second issue, also linked to the first, refers to the rift that exists between inclusive theory and practice, as there is still a high percentage of students outside mainstream classrooms (9.0 % in total, according to MEFP data, 2021) and whose right to receive a quality inclusive education is being violated, in breach of Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006).

Furthermore, of the 2.3 % of students who receive educational support in mainstream schools because they have "special educational needs", the majority are taught in special classrooms for more than 20 % of the school day (Ramberg, & Watkins, 2020), spending more hours in them the more significant their difficulties are (Wendelborg, & Tøssebro, 2011).

In this respect, there is a rift between what is theoretically desired and what happens in practice. That is, education systems guarantee two rights to all students: "the right to learn according to their possibilities and the right to learn in common with their peers of similar ages" (Marchesi, & Hernández, 2019, p. 47). In turn, both rights relate to the fourth Sustainable Development Goal of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) 2030 Agenda, which calls for both the achievement of inclusive, equitable and quality education and the

promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNESCO, 2016). But this is not the case in most educational situations, where it is forgotten that it is not enough for pupils to study together in the same mainstream classroom, but that it is necessary to ensure that all can enjoy the best conditions for learning and develop their individual potential to the fullest.

Furthermore, the current Spanish education law (LOMLOE, 2020), despite a firm commitment to educational inclusion, still leaves a loophole open for some students to be placed in special education centres, and therefore does not represent real progress in this respect, as was the case with the Warnock report (1978). This report argued that all students have educational needs and proposed that the classification of disability should disappear, but, contradictorily, it also pointed out that the needs of certain students could be considered "special" and different from those of others. Thus, the concept of "special educational needs" began to take root internationally with the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), which again committed the error of calling for inclusive education for all students, with the exception of those who, for "compelling reasons", should not attend mainstream schools.

However, special education centres limit the socio-affective development of their students to a group of people who are not representative of society in general, which hinders their subsequent labour and social integration, since "society finds it difficult to admit those it does not know" (Casanova, 2011, p. 15). In other words, it is just as important for these students to learn alongside their peers as it is for their peers to learn alongside them.

Another of the rifts between the theory and practice of educational inclusion stems from the mercantilist policies that govern much of the Spanish educational model, which permits and encourages the privatisation of education and the implementation of selective access mechanisms based on socio-economic criteria, academic performance and ethno-cultural background, which undoubtedly contributes to producing high rates of school segregation (Murillo, *et al.*, 2018) and undermines the right of all children to receive a fair, equitable and quality education. Therefore, to overcome this type of discrimination, it is necessary to focus on equal access systems and to eradicate all forms of arbitrary selection in school access (Duk, & Murillo, 2019).

Finally, a clear rift between inclusive theory and practice can be seen in the barriers resulting from curriculum design. On the one hand, at the international level (UNESCO, 1990) there is a commitment to a flexible curriculum open to diversity, a recommendation followed by Spain (LOMLOE, 2020), whose legislation, contradictorily, at the same time allows curricular adaptations for those students who need them (López-Melero, 2011), contributing to the stigmatisation and pathologisation of difference (Echeita, & Calderón, 2014). This is a segregating and discriminatory practice with respect to such students, preventing them from benefiting from the common curriculum that has been designed for all students (or rather for a non-existent "average" student). Another impediment arising from curriculum design is the

current overload of objectives and content, which prevents diversity from being adequately addressed in mainstream classrooms (Dabdub-Moreira, & Pineda-Cordero, 2015). Therefore, the curriculum must be designed under a competency-based approach that takes into account the guidelines of Universal Design for Learning (Center for Applied Special Technology [CAST], 2018; Instituto de Tecnología Educativa [ITE], 2009).

2.3. *Ableist language*

The last of the problems has to do with the mutual structuring of language and knowledge, and more specifically, with the fact that the language used to refer to human differences undoubtedly influences the attitudes held about diversity (Marchesi, & Hernández, 2019) and the educational models that are implemented (López-Melero, 2011).

For this reason, in recent decades, certain changes in nomenclature have been made to replace existing negative labels and stereotypes about human differences, as they undoubtedly lead to discrimination and segregation and hinder progress towards the full normalisation of diversity.

Thus, for example, to speak of "special educational needs" follows an ableist approach that interprets the abilities of some as "normal" and those of others as "different", worse or less valid. The same is true of "specific educational support needs", which implies that the abilities of others are "non-specific" or that these others do not require any educational support, which is impossible, as we all need some kind of support in order to learn. Therefore, it is necessary to free our educational approach from this ableist view and opt for a model of full normalisation in which it is assumed that all people have their own characteristics and educational needs (García-Barrera, 2013; Rodríguez, 2021), different from one another, and that they should be treated as such, without labels, biases or prejudices, within an education that is "special" for all. The latter is important in order to put an end to "special education", which, in addition to labelling those who receive it, implies that there is nothing special about any other type of education.

In the educational context, it is also necessary to use the concept of equity rather than equality, as it is more precise in terms of the need to cater for uniqueness and human diversity in all its fullness and richness, viewing its implicit and explicit differences in a positive way, and considering them as a great learning opportunity (Ainscow, 2001; Barth, 1990; Freire, 1993; López-Melero, 2011; Stainback, & Stainback, 1999).

Another example of change is proposed by López-Melero (2011), who advocates using the term "equivalent opportunities" rather than "equal opportunities", in order to emphasise the need to offer all students equivalent learning opportunities in terms of the possibilities provided for all learners to develop their individual potential to the fullest, but which need not be equal in the sense of being identical for all. This

is closely related to the foundations of Universal Design for Learning and the idea that students do not have to learn by doing the same thing, in the same time and in the same way (CAST, 2018; ITE, 2009). In fact, precisely in order to respect their individual differences, the teaching process must also be diversified and enriched, offering each student everything they need to learn.

Therefore, considering all the above, it is necessary to move towards a model of full normalisation that puts an end to this type of conceptual burden that prevents the construction of a true school for all and a personalised education that responds to the individual educational needs of each student and to the demands of the new learning ecology we are currently immersed in (Coll, 2016; García-Barrera, 2013, 2021).

3. CALL FOR A SCHOOL FOR ALL

The call for a school for all (Ainscow, 2001; Arnáiz, 1996, 2003; UNESCO, 1990) is not new and is supported by various regulations and mandates, including the World Declaration on Education for All (UNESCO, 1990), which initiated the inclusive education movement, stressing that its main objective was to respond to the needs of all students (Martínez, *et al.*, 2010). However, as has already been explained in previous sections, educational inclusion faces an extremely complex problem (Cruz-Vadillo, 2019; Duk, & Murillo, 2016, 2018) from which numerous difficulty-solved issues arise. If we continue to move under an inclusive paradigm in which some 'include' and others 'are included', we will not be able to put an end to the discrimination and segregation that plague our education system.

It is essential to move towards a personalised educational paradigm in which no student is labelled or excluded, because building a true school for all, with no exceptions, is fair and necessary. And to lay the foundations for this, we must achieve full normalisation of diversity, realising that we are all part of it and that our individual differences enrich us and help us learn. To this end, the education system must be based on the principles of equity and social justice, transforming schools into learning communities (Flecha, & Puigvert, 2002) that implement a critical pedagogy (D'Antoni, *et al.*, 2012; Freire, 1980; McLaren, 1997) that eliminates ableism and any other form of human discrimination (García-Barrera, 2021). Schools for all that offer every student equivalent opportunities (López-Melero, 2011) that enable them to develop their individual potential to the fullest, without exclusion (Echeita, 2006), within the framework of a learning experience tailored to their personal educational needs (García-Barrera, 2013). Schools that guarantee a fair and quality education for all, supported by Universal Learning Design (CAST, 2018; ITE, 2009) and the development of Personal Learning Plans (Coll, 2016).

But in order to achieve such a transformation, many other changes are required, some of which have already been mentioned in this article. However, it is worth reiterating the importance of teachers' attitudes towards diversity and inclusion and the provision of whatever support and help teachers and schools may require to

enhance the learning of all students (Stainback, & Stainback, 1991). However, in order to accomplish this, firstly, the initial and ongoing training of teachers, managers, educational inspectors and other professionals in the field must be improved and updated and, secondly, all special education centres must be reconverted into centres for resources, specialised support and counselling for mainstream schools (Casanova, 2011; LOMLOE, 2020).

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The progress made in recent decades towards an inclusive educational model is clearly insufficient and incomplete, committing the error of normalising the segregation of those who do not respond to the regulatory ideal and thus perpetuating all kinds of ableist practices, representations and actions (Rodríguez, 2021) that result in structural discrimination which is often concealed within the system. The language used in the inclusive model contributes to this, labelling individual differences as if only those related to learning difficulties were part of diversity. In this way, students with such differences are singled out and segregated, impeding their full inclusion (García-Barrera, 2013).

As discussed in this article, "if language is not changed, thinking will remain the same" (López-Melero, 2011, p. 41). In the case that concerns us, while we continue to talk about special or compensatory education, special educational needs, specific educational support needs, support classrooms, curricular adaptations, etc., segregation will continue to exist and be perpetuated as a commonly accepted practice in the educational sphere (Tilstone, *et al.*, 2003; López-Melero, 2011). In short, discriminatory beliefs, attitudes and practices, stereotypes and oppression will continue to exist until the perception, understanding and language used with respect to individual differences changes and they are seen as an enriching element of human nature.

There is no doubt that the educational response to diversity is complex and multifactorial, depending, among other aspects, on the ratio of students per teacher, the support staff available at the school, the resources available, the backing provided by educational administrations, legislative and regulatory support, etc.; but, especially and above all, on the skills, knowledge and experience of teachers, their attitude and perception of human differences, their sensitivity to the diverse personal educational needs of their students and their commitment to a fair and quality education for all. But, of course, in order to achieve this type of education, all of this must be accompanied by both thorough initial and ongoing teacher training (Marchesi & Hernández, 2019; Pinelli, 2015; Rizzo, *et al.*, 2021) and a widespread change in the cultures and values that characterise both this training and social beliefs and behaviours (Camedda, & Santi, 2016; Marchesi, & Hernández, 2019; Martínez, *et al.*, 2010) and, of course, educational policies that guide and support it and also guarantee the necessary resources to implement it successfully (Marchesi,

& Hernández, 2019). Because if our education system continues to be subject to continuous political ups and downs without achieving a stable educational pact that involves everyone (Cruz, 2019; Fernández-Enguita, 2018; Novella, 2020; Pellicer, 2018; Tedesco, 2010), without excluding anyone or setting itself up against anyone (Cruz, 2019), and which finally abandons political polarisation (Fernández-Enguita, 2018; Collados, & Hernández, 2020), it will be difficult for schools to overcome all the problems described in this article and succeed in building a true school for all (Ainscow, 2001; Arnáiz, 1996, 2003; UNESCO, 1990) based on a holistic model and full normalisation.

This full normalisation must be based on a diversity made up of all human beings and their differences, viewed in a positive way whatever they may be (Caamaño, *et al.*, 2022), requiring a shift in institutional policies to promote a change in mentality and attitude towards diversity, both educational (Forlin, 2010) and social, as it is essential to understand the complexity of difference, recognise discrimination and identify prejudices (Sapon-Shevin, 2017), both our own and those of others. Furthermore, for the personalised paradigm to be implemented successfully, it is necessary to carry out other actions at the educational level, such as making times, spaces, groups and school timetables more flexible, promoting interdisciplinarity between different subjects, guaranteeing the accessibility of the centre at all levels, reducing teacher-student ratios, providing each centre with the resources it needs, encouraging students to work at different levels according to their skills and knowledge, and so on.

Therefore, as the main line of action for the future, it is necessary to view diversity as an integrating framework for all individual differences, rejecting any kind of ableist or discriminatory approach to them. It is essential to work on the consolidation of this approach in order to achieve the full normalisation of the concept of diversity and to be able to achieve both a true school for all (Ainscow, 2001; Arnáiz, 1996, 2003; UNESCO, 1990) and a world in which we all have, finally and genuinely, the same rights and opportunities.

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