Educational inclusion and equity in Latin America: An analysis of the challenges

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Abstract

This article draws on its authors' experiences of engaging with the narratives of communities in Latin America implicated in the promotion of inclusion and equity in education. It illustrates how the voices of students, teachers, and families can throw light on the challenges involved. In particular, the article shows how their conditions, difficulties, achievements, fears, and hopes can provide a better understanding of their complex realities and help to shape theories of change. Incorporating the views of different stakeholders, the article focuses on the process of enabling people to become critically conscious about their realities, at the same time developing theoretical

tools to become more inclusive in their thinking. It argues that inclusive education is a radical political project that needs to be closer to the feelings and knowledge of oppressed people. This means that we must construct new narratives that encourage people to make their own challenges; this, in turn, can contribute to change at the system level. This article proposes a framework that can be used to review the situation in other countries, and offers recommendations as to how to introduce it.

Keywords

equity; inclusive education; collaborative inquiry; system change

Finding ways of including all children in schools is, arguably, the biggest challenge facing education systems throughout the world (Ainscow 2016a). In economically poorer countries this is mainly about the millions of children who are not able to attend formal education (UNESCO 2015a). Meanwhile, in wealthier countries many young people leave school with no worthwhile qualifications, whilst others are placed in various forms of special provision away from mainstream education, and some simply choose to drop out since the lessons seem irrelevant to their lives (OECD 2012). It is worth noting, too, that almost all countries in Europe and North America show a similar pattern (WHO 2016).

The countries of Latin America face particular challenges, although the nature of these concerns varies enormously from country to country and, indeed, within countries (Marchesi 2019). What can be said in general is that, despite progress in recent years, throughout the region many children are excluded from educational opportunities.

In this article we analyze evidence that we have gathered from working as consultants, using research in a range of Latin America countries focused on this important issue. In particular, we address the following questions:

- What are the barriers that limit the participation and learning of some children in Latin American countries?
- How can these barriers be best understood?
- What does this mean for moving education systems forward?

The analysis we present leads us to propose a framework that can be used to review the situation in other countries, and recommendations as to how this framework should be introduced.

The international context

Since 1990, the Education for All (EFA) movement, which has worked to make basic education available to all learners, has provided international impetus regarding inclusion and equity in schools. Reflecting on progress over the 15 years that followed, a Global Monitoring Report pointed out that, despite improvements, 58 million children were still out of school globally, and around 100 million children did not complete primary education (UNESCO 2015a). The report goes on to conclude that inequality in education had increased, with the poorest and most disadvantaged shouldering the heaviest burden from it.

More recently, UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) data show that 258 million children, adolescents, and youth are still not in school, whilst more than 617 million children and adolescents are not achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics (UIS 2019). It is also important to note that only half of the world's children receive preprimary education, a failure that limits children's futures and deepens inequities in later learning (UNICEF 2019). Significantly, the disadvantaged have least access to quality early-childhood care and education, although they benefit most from such interventions.

In addition, it is vital to recognize that large gender gaps continue to exist in regard to access, achievement, and continuation in education in many settings, most often at the expense of girls, although in some parts of the world boys are at a greater disadvantage. There is evidence, too, that education systems often perpetuate rather than challenge gender inequalities (e.g., Gray and Leith 2004).

The year 2016 was particularly important in relation to the future of the Education for All (EFA) movement. It saw the publication of the Education 2030 Framework for Action, which emphasizes inclusion and equity as laying the foundations for quality education (UNESCO 2017). It also stresses the need to address all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities and inequalities in access, participation, learning processes, and outcomes. It is clear that the international EFA agenda really has to be about "all", as reflected in the motto used in recent UNESCO guidance: "Every learner matters and matters equally" (UNESCO 2017).

The importance of including children with disabilities is an essential strand within this new international policy agenda. This is stressed in the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN 2006) and in subsequent developments:

> The right to inclusive education encompasses a transformation in culture, policy and practice in all educational environments to accommodate the differing requirements and

identities of individual students, together with a commitment to remove the barriers that impede that possibility (UN CRPD 2016).

General Comment No 4 defines non-inclusion as the education of students with disabilities in separate environments (i.e., in separate special schools, or in special education units located with regular schools). It commits to ending segregation within educational settings by ensuring inclusive classroom teaching in accessible learning environments with appropriate support. This means that education systems must provide a personalized educational response, rather than expecting the student to fit the system. It is worth adding here in regard to the argument developed in this article, that a review of evidence, based on over 280 studies conducted in 25 countries, concludes that such developments can have positive benefits for all students (Hehir, Grindal, Freeman, et al. 2016).

A recent UNESCO report, "Towards Inclusion and Equity in Education: Status, Trends and Challenge" (UNESCO 2020b), argues that moves toward inclusive education can be justified on a number of grounds. There are, it states:

> An ***educational justification***: the requirement for schools to educate all children together means that they have to develop ways of teaching that respond to individual differences and that therefore benefit all children;
>
> A ***social justification*****:** inclusive schools are intended to change attitudes to difference by educating all children together, and form the basis for a just and non-discriminatory society; and
>
> An ***economic justification*****:** it is likely to be less costly to establish and maintain schools which educate all children together than to set up a complex system of different types of school specializing in particular groups of children (UNESCO 2020b, p. 11).

In what follows we keep these arguments in mind as we analyze our experiences of supporting developments to promote inclusion and equity in Latin American countries.

The Latin American context

Latin America is a particularly interesting region to address issues of inclusion and equity, not least in relation to children with disabilities and those from indigenous backgrounds. It is the region with the greatest imbalance in income distribution in the world, even though in the first decade of the current century poverty decreased (UNESCO 2015b). The region also has ample natural resources, shared history, and a majority presence of two languages, Spanish and Portuguese, that coexist with other indigenous languages (Marchesi 2019). In this sense, the extension and

relevance of Guaraní in Paraguay stands out, where 90% of the nonindigenous population speaks Guaraní. At the same time, there are significant differences between the countries in terms of economic and social development, and in relation to their demographics. So, for example, Brazil has more than 210 million inhabitants and Mexico over 126 million, while the 7 Central American countries combined have fewer than 50 million inhabitants. In 12 of the 35 countries for which information is available, half or more of its population lived in rural areas in 2010, in marked contrast to countries such as Argentina, Uruguay, and Venezuela, where less than 10% of the population was rural (UNESCO 2013). The degree of literacy of the adult population is highly variable in the region, with particular disadvantages for Peru and Ecuador, where more than 70% were below the minimum level of literacy in 2017 (UNESCO 2020a).

On a positive note, Marchesi (2019) points out that, although there are no reliable data in relation to educational inclusion in Latin America, recent years have seen encouraging developments in school enrolment, including:

- In primary education, the proportion of children enrolled in school went up from 90.5% in 1995, to 92.3% in 2013; and
- In secondary education, the figure moved from 56.3% of students in 1995, to 75.7% in 2013, and the average dropout rate in this cycle of education slightly decreased—from 17.8% in 2000 to 15.5% in 2010.

The ratio of students to teacher is close to the average when compared to the other regions of the world, both in primary and in secondary education: 19 and 16 students per teacher, respectively. However, there is wide diversity in relation to the teachers' qualifications (UNESCO 2013).

A report from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribean (ECLAC 2019) sums up the situation as follows:

> Analysis of educational attainment by income strata reveals that there have been significant but insufficient reductions in the difficulty of access and dropout rates in primary and secondary education, especially in the lower strata. According to 2017 data, one third of the population aged 25 and over belonging to the lower-income sector did not complete primary education, which clearly represents a significant drop from the 45% observed for 2002... However, when the percentage of that population that did not complete secondary education is added, it becomes evident that close to 75% of this population group have low levels of educational attainment. (p. 61)

In an earlier volume of this journal, Vaillant (2011) explains how educational systems in Latin America had undergone considerable change over the prior 20 years. During the 1990s, nearly every country in the region had introduced reforms, such as institutional changes, systems for evaluating learning results, revisions of curriculum content, attempts to improve managerial skills, teacher incentives, and the application of strategies to improve the quality of teaching. However, she concludes that many countries had not made much visible progress, although Uruguay and Argentina had succeeded in boosting enrolments and lengthening the duration of schooling. She adds that the same cannot be said of the quality of education.

Having analyzed a range of policy documents from across the region, Amadio (2009) concluded that the main challenge for most countries is to guarantee the right to quality education for all, a view that accords with RREI [Regional Network for Inclusive Education in Latin America] (2019b) and UNESCO (2015b). For the time being, he suggested, a comprehensive approach to inclusion appears to be in its early stages, although he noted an increasing focus on the social aspects of inclusion. It is, however, important to recognize that large variations exist between countries in the region, and within some countries, such as Chile, Uruguay, and Mexico (UNESCO 2015b).

According to De Medrano Ureta (2005), the main factors related to inequity in education are income, environment (i.e., rural/urban), ethnicity, gender, and disability. Looking more closely at what is happening on the ground, Murillo and Román (2008) state:

> The main source of educational inequality in the region lies in the economic and socio-cultural inequality of the families to which the students belong. Thus, the levels of poverty and symbolic resources of families are variables which have a considerable impact on the performance of students. (p. 28)

This analysis is echoed in an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2007) report on enhancing social inclusion, which states that access to education, completion rates, and relative performance of students from poor families compared to their more affluent peers is significantly worse than among students in the same position in other regions of the world. Drawing on PISA data—about which there are many reasons to be cautious (Zhao 2020)—the OECD (2007) report concludes that Latin American educational systems are more unequal than elsewhere else in the world. In particular, it argues that the differences in performance and quality between public and private education, and between rural and urban areas, are another reason why equity should be at the heart of countries' agendas. Certainly, our experience in a range of Latin American countries leaves us with a similar overall impression,

noting, in particular, that socioeconomic school segregation in Chile and Mexico is particularly strong and stable in the last decades, as is stressed in the recent GEM report (UNESCO 2020a).

There are, however, more specific issues related to education as a right that we must not overlook. According to UNICEF 2019, over 8 million children and adolescents with disabilities live in the Latin American region; 70% of them not attend school, and 50 thousand are institutionalized. This situation is aggravated when we add other stigmatized identification characteristics: poverty, age, race, ethnicity, immigration status, sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression, among others. To achieve effective, inclusive, and intersectional responses, in this article we argue that the states of the Americas need to integrate all voices in the processes of proposing solutions. These processes must necessarily be innovative, within what is an unprecedented context and in the face of an unpredictable future.

The level of schooling reached by young people with disabilities is lower than the levels reached by those without disabilities in all the countries of Latin America (Hincapié, Duryea, and Hincapié 2019). For example, 29% of the primary schools in Mexico, and 2.4% in Peru, have ramps for accessibility. There are adapted toilets in only 14% of primary schools in Mexico and 1% in Peru. This means that people with disabilities are less likely to attend school and to complete secondary education.

Attendance gaps across disability status are larger for youth of secondary school age (12–17) than for children of primary school age (6–11), with 10% of older students on average less likely to attend than those without disabilities. However, the authors of this report urge us to be cautious of such data, since they underestimate the number of children with disabilities attending school, whose absenteeism may be much higher. We must also keep in mind issues to do with definitions. That is to say, a child defined as “disabled” or “having special needs” in one place might not be so categorized in another (Booth and Ainscow 1998).

Another highly vulnerable population group in Latin America is indigenous peoples, who have generally benefited less from the economic growth that has occurred across many countries (OECD 2007). Across the region, indigenous people experience higher levels of poverty and socioeconomic disadvantage, and levels of poverty are often worse in rural areas. In a report for the World Bank, Vegas and Petrow (2008) point out that indigenous students are less likely than their nonindigenous classmates to finish primary school. For example, in Bolivia—a country with an indigenous majority that has made great strides in primary school access—38% of indigenous and 11% of nonindigenous students 15–19 years old did not complete primary school in 2002. And in Guatemala, another country with a high percentage of indigenous students, more

than half of such students and 32% of nonindigenous failed to complete primary school. Meanwhile, low socioeconomic status and race are closely tied in Brazil.

In summary, finding ways of integrating into educational systems social groups that are excluded or find themselves in highly vulnerable situations—particularly the poor, those with disabilities, indigenous learners, and rural populations—is a fundamental challenge for all Latin American countries. In order to make recommendations regarding these problems, this article attempts to throw light on the nature of the challenges involved as they are experienced by young people and their families.

Developing a methodology

Our research involves the development of a methodology that draws on the experiences and views of representatives of different stakeholder groups. Our overall approach, which we refer to as *collaborative inquiry*, is part of a "family" of approaches within the overall tradition of action research (Reason and Bradbury 2001). It has developed out of the action research tradition of Kurt Lewin (1946) and the work of other academics over many years (e.g., Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009; Elliott 1991; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988; Schön 1983; Stenhouse 1975). It also emphasizes an engagement in inquiry to inform and improve practice, and the intentional combining of knowing and doing for achieving positive social change (Kemmis 2010).

What distinguishes this approach from more traditional research is that it involves a commitment to forms of inquiry that emphasize:

- An engagement with the views of different stakeholders, in the belief that bringing together the expertise of practitioners, students, families, and academic researchers can challenge assumptions, stimulate new thinking, and encourage experimentation with new ways of working (Ainscow et al. 2012, 2016; Calderón-Almendros and Habegger 2017; Deppeler 2013).
- *The improvement of practice* through the sharing of expertise and forms of collaborative action that stimulate efforts to find more effective ways of engaging students who are seen to be "hard-to-reach" (Hiebert, Gallimore, and Stigler 2002; Lo, Yan, and Pakey 2005; Martínez, Calderón-Almendros, and Villamor 2019; Messiou 2018).
- *Collaboration and networking* in order to move expertise around within education systems (Ainscow 2016b; Miles and Ainscow 2011; Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan 2016; Sepúlveda, Calderón-Almendros, and Torres 2012).

- *The development of local capacity for sustaining change*. This requires the use of more holistic strategies that seek to connect schools, communities, and external political and economic institutions (e.g., Kerr, Dyson, and Raffo 2014; Lipman 2004).

In this article we draw on evidence generated as we used this approach to facilitate policy reviews in the following countries: Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay. These countries have great differences between them: populations as great as 126+ million (Mexico) to as little as 3.5 million (Uruguay); areas ranging from almost 2 million km^2 (Mexico) to under 200,000 km^2 (Uruguay); GDP per capita over $27,000 (Chile) to under $12,000 (Ecuador); and with income inequalities indexed between 49.70 in Colombia and 39.50 in Uruguay (Gini Index for 2017, according to the World Bank Database). This should help the reader to get a picture of the heterogeneity of the study countries.

Up to 300 people in each country took part in seminars and workshops, during which we used participatory processes to review the national situation regarding inclusion and equity in education. The participants included parents, young people, voluntary organizations, and teachers, as well as administrators and politicians. A variety of organizations organized and supported the events, including national governments, the Organization of American States, the Organización Internacional de Teletones, EUROsociAL, Fundación ONCE, and UNESCO.

During these reviews, participants engaged in activities that led them to analyze and reflect on examples of good practices in their own and other countries. They also examined the challenges involved and how to address them. As far as possible, these debates were systematically recorded and analyzed. The paper uses extracts from these data to illuminate the argument that is developed, focusing in particular on the views of young people and their families, many of who had personal experience of feeling marginalised.

We have found that the potential benefits of collaborative enquiry, in which an open dialogue can develop, are enormous. The ideal we aspire to is an approach in which critical appraisal leads to understandings that have an immediate and direct impact on the thinking and practice in the field. A central strategy is the use of "group interpretive processes" to analyze and interpret evidence. These processes involve engaging with perspectives of different stakeholders in ways that encourage critical reflection, collaborative learning, and mutual critique (Wasser and Bresler 1996).

The issue of trustworthiness is a particular challenge to research that involves such a high degree of participation amongst stakeholders. In particular, one must be clear about what constitutes rigour within such an approach. Schön (1983) argues that without a serious effort to make clear what is meant by rigour, participatory research "becomes an open sesame to woolly-

headedness, a never-never land where anything goes" (p. 137). He goes on to suggest that appropriate rigour in the study of practice should focus on validity (e.g., how do we know what we claim to know?) and utility (e.g., how useful is the research to stakeholders?).

With this in mind, whenever possible, we used forms of triangulation: supporting our observations and reports from a number of viewpoints. These involve comparing and contrasting evidence from different people—for example, teachers, families, and students—scrutinizing events from different angles by making use of a variety of methods for collecting information; and using "outsiders" as observers.

We developed the meetings primarily in the form of workshops, round tables, or expert panels, which we recorded systematically so that we could make the outcomes more widely available. To give an example, in one country we designed a workshop for youths under the title "Reality and dreams in education". We negotiated with local organizations regarding selection of young people; we also met with participants prior to the workshop to encourage them to formulate their ideas. This process opened the conversation up to more young people, thus providing a greater diversity of views. We recorded these earlier consultations so that we could later make the ideas that had emerged known to the workshop's participants.

In some countries, we chose an "expert panel" format, in which, for example, a group of parents analyzed their experiences regarding schools. On some occasions, students and teachers were also on the panels. Some might see positioning families, young people, and teachers as experts and activist changemakers in this way as a provocative proposal, particularly as members of the public witnessed these panels.

Once again, these events were preceded by preparatory meetings, in which we worked for empowerment and liberation from the oppressions lived by many of those involved (Calderón-Almendros and Ruiz-Román 2015, 2016). This meant that they were placed in a position to offer criticism and analysis that could lead to public policies closer to what they saw as responding to their needs.

We found that many of those participants were able to be critical in expressing their ideas, since they took part in what they viewed as valuable and constructive spaces. Nonetheless, we were occasionally reminded of hidden political factors that may have limited our efforts to record authentic points of view. For example, following a series of discussions in Ecuador in 2018, one of us received an email from a member of the organizing committee, which said:

> Many participants preferred to remain silent because they knew that when the session was being recorded they would be easily identified and feared losing their jobs.

As outsiders, and particularly as visitors with limited knowledge of local contexts, we recognize the danger that we could jump to conclusions based on limited evidence. In addition, we are conscious that vested interests could be shaping the process; for example, the choice of participants for the workshops.

Making sense of the evidence

The evidence we have collected through these participatory processes has enabled us to step closer to what happens within the education systems of Latin America, as experienced by different stakeholders. In what follows, we summarize this evidence in relation to five themes that emerged from our analysis as being significant in terms of the promotion of inclusion and equity. We discuss these below.

Principles

We know from research carried out elsewhere in the world that policy is made at all levels of an education system, not least at the school and classroom levels (Ainscow, Chapman, and Hadfield 2020). Further, the promotion of inclusion and equity is not simply a technical or organizational change. Rather, it is a movement in a clear philosophical direction, requiring a culture of inclusion that permeates the education system.

The creation of this cultural change requires a shared commitment amongst staff at the national, district, and school levels. It is, therefore, crucial that those who need to be involved in this change have a clear sense of what is intended. In particular, we must define the terms "inclusion" and "equity"—which we take to be principles on which policy should be based—in ways that are meaningful to a diverse range of stakeholders. It is also important to understand how local constructions can nurture, nuance, and strengthen these central ideas in order to build consensus that incorporates diversity and complexity, and, thus, improves the ability to question how the school system is functioning.

Listening to students can be particularly helpful in determining to what extent stakeholders have such clarity regarding the principles that guide policies within their countries. For example, we heard the following comments from young people in Paraguay:

> There are two realities: the one for those who can access and the other for who can't.
>
> They don't teach us for life, they make us memorize.
>
> We need a safe education.
>
> We want … a school that looks less like a jail.

We want an open education, outside the walls.

Listening to challenging comments such as these reminds us that students have the ability to recognize problems, although their view may vary on what these are. Furthermore, their school experiences allow us to see shortcomings, problems, and potentialities in new ways. Whilst young people often use simple arguments, they sometimes point to the root of the problems, such as when: their school is too authoritarian; learning is not useful for their lives; the institution classifies and segregates. In addition, they tend to prioritize accessibility and security, which they see as being fundamental to achieving change. For example, a student in Uruguay expressed deeply held views when he commented on his experience in school:

> I always had the support of the institution I went to, and well, but always it was like: "We are learning with you". Always making that difference. Sorry if I'm not being very clear, but what I want to remark is that inclusion is not a process in which you have to mark the child. The child has to be protagonist in that process but not saying: "We are going to include you, we are going to help you, because we would be making a difference. Inclusion is not something that is said, but is something to be done. Oh, sorry! Try not to make a difference, just do it".
>
> He went on:
>
> A title for all this is: "Trying to make inclusion in a low voice". What does it mean? Try to make it so that the effort is not on the part of the child, but on the part of the teachers. You can imagine that on the part of the family and the children who have to live this process, it involves emotional stress. What must be done is that the effort and change do not fall solely on the child, the family, and the child's environment, but also on the part of the institution, the child and the family as well.

A student in Chile commented: "Sometimes teachers exaggerate about people with disabilities. They exaggerate because what they have is ignorance of how to treat us." Having heard this suggestion on a video, a student in Mexico reflected: "The word used by this guy, 'exaggerate', invites us to think that schools make a world from something small." Something similar was said by a girl in Mexico when a teacher told her that he did not know how to teach her: "Is it really so different to teach me?". In these ways, students from different countries denounce the obsession with categorizing students and, in so doing, invite the participation of their teachers in a fight to win rights.

One of the most illustrative anecdotes of the students' questioning capacity occurred while one of us was working as a facilitator of different youth and children's work tables in Chile. A girl who was writing with her foot said to a man who had come over to her table to provide guidance,

"Why are you interrupting us?" He apologized and walked away, and after the session, he approached her and said, "At the end we have become friends". She replied, "It is necessary to challenge, because otherwise nothing changes". During a debate that followed, the girl said, "Some teachers believe they have the absolute truth".

At the same time, whenever possible, we have found it helpful to triangulate such comments with those who have a wider view of the situation within national education systems. For example, a Mexican researcher commented: "No matter how rich or poor you are in Mexico, your education is bad or very bad".

The use of evidence

In order to address problems of access and equity in education systems, it is important to know who is included, who is segregated, and who is excluded from schooling. Without an engagement with evidence in relation to all of these forms of exclusion, there can be little accountability. Furthermore, engaging with such evidence has the potential to stimulate efforts to find more effective ways of promoting the participation and progress of all learners. Data on contextual factors are therefore needed, including on policies, practices, and facilities, and also on attitudes and social relationships.

However, we have found that such data are rarely available in Latin American countries. For example, various reports on the Latin American region (e.g., FIADOWN 2019; RREI 2018, 2019; UNESCO 2019) support Marchesi's (2019) view, reported earlier, that few statistics are available about people with disabilities in the school systems. Indeed, we do not even know how many special schools the region has (RREI 2018).

This lack of information reinforces why educators and policy makers must seek and value the views of young people and families, particularly those from at-risk groups. Their voices can throw light on what is happening within an education system. At the same time, they are likely to challenge policy makers and practitioners to find more effective ways of ensuring that all children are included. These examples illustrate the potential of this:

> *High school student, Chile (sister of a high school student with a disability), visibly excited:* An injustice is not allowing a child to enrol in a school because of her disability. Well, that is many times one of the biggest problems, because we have to be struggling and looking for what school will accept you. I believe that in all schools they should accept and not make a difference.
>
> *Young person and activist, Paraguay:* I was thinking about the prison, which means acronyms and diagnoses. How they squeeze us, how they silence us. … If we took time to

be with the others, the abnormality would leak from that body, from that mouth, from that voice.

At the same time, it is helpful to take account of the responses of practitioners, as they reflect on hearing such comments. For example:

Policy maker, Paraguay: Inclusion in Paraguay responds not only to the problem of the inclusion of persons with disability but to system problems that we need to reform.

Here again, it is necessary to recognize that certain groups are particularly vulnerable to being overlooked, such as learners from low-income families, those in all kinds of disabling situations, and others from ethnic or minority backgrounds. Some of the views we heard are troubling in this respect:

Young person and activist, Paraguay: The challenge is one of sights ... Tell me how they have looked at you and I will tell you who you are. The challenge is to see how we look to the others and how we are looked at. There are looks that kill. How many normicides have you committed in the last 24 hours looking to others?

("Normicide", a word that the speaker invented, is a mix of "norm" and "homicide". What it purports to say is that the use of normality kills those who are outside of it.) And when asked, "What do you like most about your school?", a student in Mexico offered what struck us as a damning response when he replied, "The exit".

Such views point to barriers of access, including attitudinal barriers that impede the development of students and that may hinder their well-being and their desire to participate and learn in schools.

Our argument, then, is that plans for promoting inclusion and equity in education must take account of such views in order to identify and remove barriers to participation and learning. As we have seen, these views can be challenging and troubling, but they can also throw light on how change can be achieved.

School development

Evidence from OECD (cited in Schleicher 2015) suggests that countries where teachers believe their profession is valued show higher levels of equity in learning outcomes. This suggests that we must reform schools and develop practices in ways that will lead teachers to feel supported in responding positively to student diversity—seeing individual differences not as problems to be fixed but as opportunities for enriching learning. In this way, a consideration of difficulties that students experience can provide an agenda for change and insights as to how to bring about such

changes. At the same time, positive examples can provide encouragement. To take an example, a young activist in Uruguay explained:

> There had never been a person with a disability in the institution, but what I felt was not resistance—what I felt was an openness and they transmitted it to me. They transmitted it to me because I perceived how my environment behaved … . I love, myself, to meet with my teacher …

International research suggests that a starting point for strengthening schools' capacity to respond to learner diversity is the sharing of existing practices through collaboration amongst staff, leading to experimentation with new practices that will reach out to all students (Ainscow 2016a). This is more likely to be successful in contexts where a culture of collaboration encourages and supports problem-solving. Therefore, development of inclusive practices must involve those within a particular context in working together to address barriers to education that some learners face.

Having a chance to see other teachers at work is known to be particular powerful in this respect. For example, a primary-school teacher in Mexico who took part in a school exchange project commented:

> We visited the classrooms, there were spaces where we could go to visit other partners, and to do, together with the coordinator, observations of the class. After that, at the board meetings, we had feedback on these observations. It was very enriching because we do not see each other, there is very little that we see ourselves and we analyze ourselves, the day to day and we are taken by routine.

In such contexts, listening to the views of students can help to make the familiar unfamiliar in ways that stimulate self-questioning, creativity, and action amongst teachers (Messiou and Ainscow 2015). This can lead to a reframing of perceived problems that, in turn, draws the teacher's attention to overlooked possibilities for addressing barriers to participation and learning. In this way, differences amongst students become less of a problem and more of a catalyst for improvement.

For example, some of the students we met made comments that illustrate the potential for them to help teachers develop more inclusive practices:

> *Secondary student, Mexico:* I do not like working in a team very much, because, for example, in my case, my colleagues do not include … me in their teams. So, for that reason, I have to wait until the end to see if anyone is left, to do it with me. So, I don't like working as a team that much. … What I don't like is that I basically don't have a team. … They

don't work with me with pleasure. They … ran out of equipment and I am their only option. That is why I do not like it.

Many teachers and family members in the countries of our research have also called for changes in initial teacher training and in-service professional development, to contribute to the transformation of schools and the educational system. This is echoed in various reports (e.g., FIADOWN 2019; RREI 2019) and by UNESCO (2013), arguing for the use of participatory approaches such as action research (Stenhouse 1975) and reflection-in-action (Schön 1983).

This thinking shares the overall perspective used in our work, as noted by a mother in Mexico, who saw the sorts of activities we facilitated as a stimulus for professional learning:

> I think that it should be essential to attend this type of [participative] seminar as part of teacher training: this type of practice, where they see that there are things that are not because the children do not want to do it, they cannot do it. There are children who maybe have to go to the toilet twenty-five times because they have to, not because they love going to the toilet, and that's a problem, eh? "Your son doesn't come out of the toilet". Well, he needs to go to the toilet.

The comments of teachers, some of who are themselves parents of vulnerable learners, pointed to the personal struggles they had experienced:

> *Teacher, Paraguay:* Maybe I was a teacher reluctant to change, because I was only for my son, very selfish. Adversity and sadness at the time made me think that the human being can transform all of that into a positive situation. That is what I have learned.

The roles of national and local education departments

Movement toward inclusion and equity is likely to require some restructuring of the way education is provided within a country. Such of those involved—not least, parents who understandably want to do the best for their own children—may resist such changes. In particular, parents who have fought to acquire additional support for their children may be concerned that moves toward inclusion may see such extra help disappear.

Many parents we have met describe their struggles to get their children accepted. For example:

> *Mother, Chile:* My daughter was not accepted at school, and they justified it because "she was not prepared". The school denied her access because of ignorance and not wanting to know, because of the fear of the unknown. … Academic excellence vs. my daughter.

In this case, lack of training, school resistance, and fear as a driving emotion are denounced. Meanwhile, in Peru and Paraguay, families highlighted the excessive responsibility placed on

teachers who had very precarious working conditions. It is evident that the experiential knowledge that families are accumulating can be of great value in uncovering barriers and proposing solutions. In Ecuador, Chile, and Paraguay, families and teachers claimed to take part in the design of educational policy decisions.

Dealing with difficulties such as these means that it is essential to have a shared commitment amongst senior staff at the national, district, and school levels. In particular, staff must value differences, invest in collaboration, and commit to providing equitable educational opportunities. Therefore, leaders at all levels of an education system must be prepared to analyze their own situations, identify local barriers and facilitators, and plan an appropriate development process to promote the development of inclusive attitudes and practices within their communities.

A recent report noted that four of the most successful national education systems—Singapore, Estonia, Finland, and Ontario—each has a coherent "middle tier", regardless of their differing extents of school autonomy or devolution of decision making (Bubb et al. 2019). In particular, they all had district-level structures that offered a consistent view that, to maintain equity as well as excellence, there needs to be an authoritative coordinating influence with local accountability. Our experience is that such structures is missing in some Latin American countries. For example, Uruguay has no apparent form of district-level coordination. Added to this, school leaders are often low status and have few chances to work together to coordinate collective efforts amongst schools serving their local area, a strategy that has proved effective in promoting equity in other parts of the world (Ainscow 2016a).

It is also important to recognize that the maintenance of segregated systems (i.e., separate ordinary and special schools) in all countries creates contradictions and diverts resources away from reforming the mainstream. Above all, it promotes injustice, discrimination, and inequity. Even in Paraguay, which has a policy of nonrejection from schools, families and students talked about the distance between reality and the law. Referring to policy rhetoric—versus policy on the ground—in a number of other countries we sometimes heard the expression, "It is wet paper".

The participation of everybody involved in the lives of children

In order to foster inclusion and equity in education, governments need to mobilize human and financial resources, some of whom or which may not be under their direct control. Forming partnerships among key stakeholders who can support and own the process of change is therefore essential (Kerr, Dyson, and Raffo 2014). These stakeholders include: parents/caregivers; teachers and other education professionals; teacher educators and researchers; national, local, and school-level administrators and managers; policymakers and service providers in other sectors (e.g.,

health, child protection, social services); civic groups in the community; and members of minority groups that are at risk of exclusion. A teacher in Mexico offered an example:

> I wanted to comment on an activity that we had with a community of Purepecha children [indigenous community]. They arrived at a school and then there was some agitation because they still spoke Purepecha, so they could not access the curriculum. Then, as there was this conflict with the teachers, we went to the parents. The parents could speak Purepecha and then they could be talking there … .

Such examples reinforce the case for the engagement of families in particular. In some Latin American countries, families and education authorities already cooperate closely in developing community-based programmes for certain groups of learners, such as those who are excluded because of their gender, social status, or impairments. A logical next step is for these parents to become involved in supporting change for developing inclusion in schools. Commenting on this, parents described varied experiences. For example:

> *Mother, Chile:* If I have all my best disposition, and I know my son better as a mum, I think that if we work together with the school, my son and so many other children would have a better school.
>
> *Father, Chile:* I thought they were going to tell me what I had to think and what I had to do, and I realize that I'm the one who has to do it.

It is worth adding here that some research suggests that the development of education systems that are effective for all children will only happen when what happens outside as well as inside a school changes (Kerr, Dyson, and Raffo 2014). In particular, there is encouraging evidence of what can happen when schools align in a coherent strategy with the efforts of other community players—employers, community groups, universities, and public services (Ainscow 2016b). This does not necessarily mean schools doing more, but it does imply partnerships beyond the school, where partners multiply the impacts of each other's efforts. In this sense, there is a long way to go regarding the involvement of the public in the region.

All this underlines the value of participatory and action-oriented processes, where stakeholders form networks, analyze realities, and share experiences. Here, it is important to build on existing developments in the region, such as the efforts of NGOs in Peru and Paraguay to support schools in developing inclusive practices; and wider participative experiences to generate public debate about inclusion and school change, like Citizen Dialogues for Education in Peru, the the national consultation "Yo opino, es mi derecho" [I think, it is my right] of the Chilean National Council for Children, and the Mandela Network and the Parliament of Children and Adolescents, in Uruguay.

Moving forward in Latin America

In each of the Latin American countries where we have worked, participants generated a set of recommendations that we shared with those involved and more widely within the communities. Our intention was to stimulate further debate that will help to move policy and practice forward. In some instances, we continue to have active roles in supporting these developments.

Whilst our emphasis is on generating recommendations that relate to particular countries, we have seen that certain overall factors seem to be relevant across Latin America. Looking at the evidence we have generated—as well as of various reports from international organizations and institutions in the region—the following actions for promoting inclusion and equity seem to be particularly significant:

- Make use of participatory processes that involve the different actors in the project of making schools inclusive. Put simply, they need to be change-makers, not objects of change.
- Take steps to ensure the presence, participation, and progress of all learners in schools, with particular emphasis placed on disadvantaged populations, children with disabilities, and those from minority backgrounds.
- Develop tools for monitoring the situation of regional education and inequalities, as well as plans for architectural and cultural accessibility.
- Create national teacher-training plans, which should be developed with the involvement of administrations, universities, and civil society. They should join forces to create democratic cultures and practices based on the voices of the entire community.
- Introduce legislation that ends violations of the right to education for *all* children and young people. This must go hand in hand with strengthening public education such that the separation of children into parallel systems of special and general provision becomes unnecessary.

Latin America faces great challenges. Yet, it also has an energy that has surprised us wherever we have been able to exchange knowledge and experiences. This impulse, along with the generation of international strategies, has shed much light and hope for the development of schools in the region based on the principles of inclusion and equity.

A framework for analysis

We structured our recommendations—in various Latin American countries—in relation to an *analytical framework* that emerged from, and was refined during, our work across the region. This framework, which we believe would be useful in other parts of the world, consists of the following sets of questions:

In terms of **principles**:

- Are there agreed definitions of inclusion and equity in education?
- If so, are these definitions widely known and understood across the education system?

In terms of **use of evidence**:

- Are systems in place to monitor the presence, participation, and achievement of all school students?
- Is there an awareness of which students are left behind or left out?
- Do schools use evidence to stimulate efforts to include all students?
- Are the views of students used to encourage inclusion in schools?

In terms of **school development**:

- Are teachers encouraged to develop practices that are intended to include all students?
- Are there effective professional-development programmes related to inclusive practices?
- Do school leaders emphasize the importance of inclusive education?

In terms of the roles of **education departments**:

- Do national policymakers encourage the development of inclusive practices?
- Do local district administrators take actions to promote the development of inclusive practices?
- Are schools encouraged to collaborate in order to develop effective practices?

In terms of **community involvement**:

- Are families seen as partners in supporting their children's education?
- Do schools collaborate with other professionals, such as those involved in the health and social services?
- Do schools link with the efforts of other local players; e.g., employers, community groups, universities, and public services?

These questions reinforce the idea that the promotion of inclusion and equity in education is essentially a social process that has to occur within particular contexts. It is about learning how

to live with difference and, indeed, learning how to learn from difference. It therefore requires the coming together of local knowledge provided by insiders.

With this in mind, our experience in various countries suggests that it is helpful if a steering group—set up to lead the process of review and development—develops an action plan. In our view, such a group should have representation from the different stakeholder groups. Political mandate and support for its work are vital if the steering group is to have an impact.

In developing an action plan, we suggest that the group take the following steps:

- **Hold consultations:** Broad-based consultation will be necessary to arrive at widespread support for the changes being made. The group should encourage a collective process to stimulate reflection and debate about progress (e.g., using workshops, focus group discussions). It should also consider different participatory approaches to ensure that stakeholders from marginalized groups—such as ethnic and linguistic minorities—and persons with disabilities will feel empowered to take part in the discussions.
- **Prepare a report**: Following these consultations, the steering group should guide the development of a synthesis report of the key findings, and develop recommendations for actions needed to move policy forward. An action plan—identifying key steps, persons responsible, and a timeline for implementing the recommendations—can accompany the synthesis report.
- **Monitor implementation of the action plan**: Remembering that education policy is "made at all levels", it will be important to monitor the way that changes are introduced across the system. This monitoring could be one of the steering group's continuing roles. As the group conducts this monitoring, it will be important to keep stakeholders informed of progress in implementing the plan, using examples of effective practice that inspire widespread involvement in the change process.

The investigations reported here involved attempts to follow this approach, although, as we have noted, this was often far from straightforward. Nevertheless, the process has revealed that, within participating Latin American countries, massive untapped potential exists amongst stakeholders that can be drawn on to promote inclusive education.

Conclusion

We conclude by returning to the three justifications, mentioned earlier, for an emphasis on inclusive education. First of all, our experiences in Latin America suggest that making progress in

relation to the *educational justification* will depend on far greater efforts to prepare and support teachers in strengthening their capacity to educate all children, whatever their personal characteristics or circumstances. This is line with evidence from the OECD (Schleicher 2015) suggesting that countries where teachers believe their profession is valued show higher levels of equity in learning outcomes.

Secondly, the potential of schools to help reduce the impact of inequality in communities can be seen as a *social justification* for promoting inclusion. As Marchesi (2019) argues in relation to Latin American countries, "[S]tudents who come from vulnerable socioeconomic contexts tend to have poorly trained teachers and they access schools with more limited services and resources. The consequence of all is that the initial inequalities are maintained and reproduced from generation to generation" (p. 9*).* One can observe this in relation to other at-risk groups, too, especially in the intersections between all of them.

And, thirdly, it is likely that investing in educational improvement based on the principles of inclusion and equity will pay off in terms of the *economic strength* of countries in the region. As reported by the OECD (2012), reducing school failure strengthens the capacities of individuals and societies to contribute to economic growth and social well-being. Students who have enriching school experiences, we suggest, will be more likely to stay in education and successfully transfer to the labour market.

All of which leads us to agree with the position taken by OECD (2012):

> The evidence is conclusive: equity in education pays off. The highest performing education systems across OECD countries are those that combine high quality and equity. In such education systems, the vast majority of students can attain high level skills and knowledge that depend on their ability and drive, more than on their socio-economic background.

We also support Hincapié, Duryea, and Hincapié (2019), who argue that a shift toward inclusive education in Latin America requires political will and commitment, based on a strong and consistent message. Our recommendation is that this message must take account of the voices we report in this article.

Notes

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