

## **Inclusive or exclusive education? A challenge for the Spanish school system**

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### **Abstract**

The violation of the right to education in the Spanish educational system has been denounced by recognised international organisations. There is therefore a need to outline courses of action against exclusion and segregation in schools. This was the main objective of the workshop held at the University of Malaga (Spain) as part of a national research project on inclusive education (RTI2018-099218-A-I00). This event was attended by more than one hundred people representing the educational community (families, professionals, and students), and it served as a meeting point to discuss how the principles of equity and equal opportunities are currently applied to students with disabilities in the Spanish school system. The qualitative analysis of the exchange of views that took place during this meeting has been used to diagnose the situation, with a view to shedding light on some of the factors that are involved in promoting school segregation and its effects.

Keywords: Inclusive education; exclusion; segregation; disability; equity.

### **¿Educación inclusiva o exclusiva? El reto del sistema escolar en España**

#### **Resumen**

La vulneración del derecho a la educación del sistema educativo español es una realidad denunciada por reconocidos organismos internacionales. De ahí la necesidad de perfilar líneas de acción contra la exclusión y segregación escolar, principal objetivo del *workshop* celebrado en la Universidad de Málaga (España) en el marco de un proyecto de investigación nacional sobre educación inclusiva (RTI2018-099218-A-I00). Este evento, al que acudieron más de cien personas pertenecientes a la comunidad educativa (familias, profesionales y alumnado), sirvió de punto de encuentro para discutir cómo se aplica el principio de equidad al alumnado con discapacidad en nuestro sistema escolar. El análisis cualitativo del diálogo surgido durante este encuentro ha servido para realizar un diagnóstico de la situación, buscando arrojar luz sobre algunos de los factores que intervienen en la segregación escolar y favorecen su reproducción, así como sobre los efectos que produce.

Palabras clave: Educación inclusiva; exclusión; segregación; discapacidad; equidad.

Mode: Paper presentation.

## **1. Introduction**

For some time now, several international organisations have issued warnings about the inequality that exists in the access some students have to the school system and their chances of success (UN, 2017; OECD, 2018; MEFP, 2019). Education systems have contributed to perpetuating inequalities based on biological differences, thus absolving the collective consciousness from any responsibility (Hughes and Paterson, 2008). Before implementing the much-demanded change, it is important to identify the difficulties that prevent the development of inclusive education in schools, and initiate a transformation process to overcome them, and so meet the needs of diverse students using a more democratic approach (Ainscow, 2001; Apple and Beane, 2005; Dewey, 2010; Echeita, 2007).

In order to investigate the perception that members of the educational community have of these issues, we carried out a qualitative analysis of the testimonies extracted from the workshop entitled 'New perspectives on school guidance, for children and against segregation', held at the University of Malaga on 24 February 2018. The stories that were told by the education professionals, families and students with disabilities who attended the meeting made it possible to identify and conduct an in-depth analysis of the difficulties that these students encounter in receiving an inclusive education in schools and in a social context that discriminates against them. This workshop allowed us to create support networks and coordinate efforts to devise strategies aimed at transforming schools into institutions constructed by all and for all.

By analysing the narratives that resulted from this event, we found that the right to equal opportunities and inclusive education did not apply equally to all learners. Boys and girls from lower socio-economic and socio-cultural backgrounds and those with some kind of disability experience failure at school the most (Marchesi, 2003; Perrenoud, 1990; Rascón and Calderón, 2019).

The marginalisation of these groups in citizen participatory processes and in public policies has either weakened or practically removed their sense of belonging to a common social project. In developing this collective consciousness, the importance of educating the personal and social dimensions of mainstream society is often overlooked. This would allow an individual's abilities to be put before their disabilities. There is certainly no better place to make this happen than in school, as it is the first place where children have the opportunity to encounter diversity and be enriched by this interaction. Therefore, it is essential to change all those obsolete conceptions, inflexible structures and hierarchical and fragmented relational systems that prevent our education systems

from meeting the interests and needs of their increasingly diverse students, and to make schools participatory and democratic spaces.

## **2. Context and work methodology**

The experience presented here is part of a larger research project entitled 'Emerging Narratives on Inclusive Schooling based on the Social Model of Disability. Resistance, resilience and social change (RTI2018-099218-A-I00). This project is being carried out at the University of Malaga and has been funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities. The main objective of the research is to document and analyse narratives on disability and educational inclusion coming from the disabled community and disseminate them.

One of the initiatives arising from the project was the workshop entitled 'New Perspectives in School Guidance, for Children and against Segregation', which is the subject of this paper. The meeting took place on 24 February 2018 at the Faculty of Education Sciences of the University of Málaga, and was attended by one hundred participants in person, and attended virtually by many others (for reasons of space and mobility). The attendees included teachers, school guidance counsellors, health, administration, and education management staff, legal experts, families of school children and students from all over Spain.

The workshop was held on a single 10-hour session, with a remarkable level of involvement from the attendees. At the same time, forums were set up so that people who had not been able to attend in person could contribute online in real time. All this was facilitated by a participatory methodology that was introduced in an initial assembly where the different topics to be dealt with were collectively decided. These topics were addressed in simultaneous workshops held in different rooms and coordinated by some of the participants. Three workshops resulted from this experience, which focused on these issues:

- Workshop 1: What happens in schools where some children do not fit in? The main purpose of the workshop was to identify the causes of practices that segregate and exclude, leaving many children outside of mainstream schools.
- Workshop 2: Putting the psychological and pedagogical assessment to the test. This workshop identified the main difficulties encountered by counsellors, families, and students with disabilities in the current design of the psychological and pedagogical assessment, in order to outline various strategies that would contribute to its transformation.

- Workshop 3: Legal barriers. This third workshop identified some of the main legal obstacles that families face in accessing schooling for their children and in enforcing their right to inclusive, equitable and high-quality education.

At the end of these workshops, a final assembly was organised where flipcharts were used to record the ideas that had emerged in each of the workshops. Both the assemblies and the workshops were broadcast on streaming and had a large online following, and became a *Trending Topic* on *Twitter* in Spain. The full session is available on *Youtube* ( <https://bit.ly/3mbxYkL> ) and has been transcribed verbatim for the analysis presented here. Audio-visual micro-stories were also created by the families of children with disabilities ( <https://bit.ly/2EX6Tys> ) and subsequently translated into English ( <https://bit.ly/2OYREGL> ). The workshop report is currently being prepared collaboratively, and families and education professionals have started working as part of a Participatory Action Research Core Team.

The testimonies collected during the workshop served to show the hurtful inequality faced by students, families, and education professionals who had experienced the psychological and pedagogical diagnoses, and a misguided approach to diversity (Calderón, 2018). This meeting was also an opportunity for the different people involved to share their conceptions and experiences regarding the mechanisms that generate discrimination, segregation and exclusion of the disabled in schools.

All these narratives led us to ask ourselves four important questions underlying the different ways of conceiving and catering for the needs of diverse learners. These questions are: What do we mean by education? What factors cause and reproduce school segregation and exclusion? and What are their effects on children?

### **3. The right to inclusive education**

The right to education is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and in several international agreements. It is also one of the guiding principles of the Global Education 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). However, as with other fundamental rights, there are repeated violations of the right to education on a global scale. There have been numerous accusations that the Spanish education system segregates and excludes vulnerable groups, putting their future at risk. Many children are tested on a daily basis, being forced to prove their abilities in a school and social system that focuses primarily on highlighting their 'inabilities', while building ever more unreachable and insurmountable walls.

In 2018, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities released a report stating that Spain had violated the right to education of children with disabilities (UN, 2017). In 2020, the first final judgement was issued that ruled against Spain for violating the right to education of a child with Down's syndrome. According to the Committee's report, at no time were the necessary measures taken to enable this child to continue his education in an ordinary school. The Committee requested that the Spanish Government should develop a legislative reform adapted to the principles of the Convention, and to undertake the necessary measures to guarantee the right to inclusive education.

In this context, one wonders whether the very act of educating is not in itself inclusive. Education cannot be conceived as a selective process, since its main purpose is to contribute to the overall development of all children. So how is it that there are still some boys and girls who are not given the opportunity to benefits from this right in the same context and under the same conditions as others? It may be the case that in the 21st century, education is still seen as a privilege, and not as a right.

There is an increasingly pressing social demand for inclusive education. Hence the importance of identifying and making visible other voices that resist the prevailing conception of education and struggle to facilitate social and cultural learning for all children. For Operti, Walker and Zhang (2014), the right to education for all people, whatever their personal, social, religious, and other characteristics, is a fundamental pillar of inclusive education. This conception of education primarily seeks to overcome all forms of segregation and socio-educational exclusion. It aims to foster access opportunities and the possibility of remaining in ordinary schools for all boys and girls; and it promotes participation mechanisms that lead to a high-quality education that provides valuable learning and the overall development of all students.

Inclusive education does not claim anything extraordinary, but rather the opposite: it is interested in showing that diversity is part of our society and that it needs answers. Nothing should seem more ordinary than requesting that a fundamental right be fully enforced. This involves meeting the needs of all learners without exception (Unesco, 2020) and offering individualised, student-centred attention, together with encouraging educational practices that involve vulnerable children or those at risk of exclusion in their educational process. This requires measures to compensate for inequalities, foster participation and remove barriers that prevent equity and successful learning (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Ainscow & Echeita, 2011).

What is considered normal in a classroom is variety, difference, and heterogeneity of students. This should be understood as a learning opportunity, as it allows students to experience and

internalise values such as respect, empathy, solidarity, equity, and tolerance, for the benefit of all students in the school (Arnaiz, 2004). One of the main aspirations of inclusive education is to make education accessible to all learners, regardless of whether they belong to marginalised social groups, have special educational needs, come from other cultures, etc. (Booth and Ainscow, 1998).

The educational response needed to cater for the diversity of students demands both general and specific organisational and curricular measures, which enable learning conditions and opportunities to be adapted to the different characteristics of all children, and that lead to their successful schooling (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). This means that the curriculum needs to be redesigned and adjusted to this new all-encompassing approach to heterogeneity.

#### **4. Analysis and results**

##### **4.1. Causes and reproduction of school segregation and exclusion**

One of ideas that was repeatedly brought up in the workshop was the need to make changes to Organic Law 8/2013, of 9 December, for the Improvement of the Quality of Education (LOMCE). One of the most demanded changes was eliminating different modes of schooling, so that inclusive education would become the only form of compulsory education.

... If there were no law to protect the different models of schooling, there would be no reports.  
(Alejandro, father)

...Of the four modes of schooling available, three of them are segregating and excluding. And I come up against attitudes that are paralysed by fear, it is very difficult to get people out of their comfort zones. And families [are] desperate for their children to have high-quality education (Macarena, counsellor)

Another key theme of the meeting was the experience of segregation and exclusion that many children face in their respective schools. Some of the factors considered to be responsible for school segregation and exclusion and their reproduction were identified. The most significant are:

a) An exclusionary conception of education that permeates educational institutions and the applicable legislation. The expansion and consolidation of the conception of education as a privilege has led to segregating and excluding practices and modes of schooling, resulting in inclusive education being perceived as a social service of excellence. Most of those who attended the meeting agreed that the existence of different modes of schooling favours the reproduction of segregation and exclusion, as they provide for admission to dedicated classrooms or special schools.

Many participants insisted that the way to truly enforce the right to inclusive education is ending these dedicated classrooms and special schools.

... There are four models of schooling and only one is inclusive. As long as there is no single model or group of schooling, we have a problem and we have illegality (Alejandro, father).

... There is a national trend in all the autonomous regions to put children who were in ordinary classrooms in special classrooms; it totally outrageous, this goes against the international convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. (Carmen, mother, and chair of SOLCOM)

b) Excessively standardised education. One of the problems of the Spanish education system is that it is based on an obsolete model that tends to prioritise results over processes. In this way, the teaching and learning process is constrained by a fragmented curriculum, oriented towards standardised objectives, which uses assessment systems biased by quantifiable indicators that fail to take into account the real needs of learners.

...I am the mother of a child with Down's syndrome, the problems I have encountered... my son is in the first year of primary school, and the problem is that his tutor told us this year... no, last year, that she had to meet certain objectives, so she couldn't give my son the time he needed because she had to meet those objectives with the other children. Reading and writing objectives. (María José, mother)

c) Lack of resources and deficiencies in the allocation and management of resources. The families and professionals attending the workshop all agreed that the Education Authority not only allocated insufficient resources to state schools to address diversity, but also did so on the basis of segregating and excluding practices. The precariousness and scarcity of resources sometimes lead to harmful and unethical actions, in which the educational needs of some boys and girls are magnified or fictitious ones are created in order to raise funds and/or maintain resources.

... That school did not have the resources to look after my son; it may have a heated swimming pool, it may have many things, but it did not have the resources to look after my son, so the psychological and pedagogical report was made as a kind of bandage, in order to exclude my son (María José, mother)

... There is an administrative problem in this school. Next year they are closing a dedicated classroom because haven't got enough students... and of course, instead of having someone from outside come (which poses more difficult problems) , they prefer referring my daughter, who doesn't cause any problems, who is a happy child, without any behavioural problems, to C mode of schooling, just because. [the guidance counsellor at her daughter's

school) told her about this]. So they forced the counsellor to write a lot of negative reports about my daughter, which she outright refused to do, obviously, because she visits my daughter in class and does not see any problems; what's more, she has asked the school again to please keep her in the third year of infant school so that she can mature and so on... (Ana, mother).

... With the arrival of this special school, support for mainstream schools was also cut back (Mirela, mother and founder of APIES)

Another issue has to do with the management and unequal distribution of these resources. Some participants agreed that the lack of resources could be compensated for by establishing a hierarchy of priorities that takes the inclusion of all pupils in mainstream settings as a guiding principle. In addition, there were many who insisted on the need for more material resources, and mainly for more qualified staff to reduce the student/teacher ratio and provide more personalised attention.

...I have found that 'as we have a dedicated classroom, [you need to] put a child in there who needs a dedicated classroom, otherwise the specific classroom will disappear'. In other words, children are being matched to resources, rather than matching resources to children (Raúl, counsellor)

... Last term they brought in a child with a very complicated social problem. They put him in Year 2 with a great classmate. He was a child who ran away from class and we had to run after him through the corridors to find him, we didn't know where he was. The whole team, including the educational therapist, the speech therapist, as well as serving the whole school they had to look after this boy. We asked them to please bring some support staff that he could look after him. Do you know how the story ended? The child left the school. They changed his mode of schooling and he is now in an integration classroom in another school in town. So that's it, that's how they have removed the problem, because he wasn't called a child, he was called a problem (Lola, mother, and primary school teacher)

... There needs to be a change in teacher training, bureaucratic segregation needs to change, there is a lack of resources, but even so more can be done, you just have to want to do it. (Marta, ESO counsellor)

d) Lack of suitable initial and lifelong teacher training. One of the main points highlighted by those attending the meeting was the need to provide teachers with more practical training, giving them tools to meet the needs of their diverse pupils.

...As far as training courses are concerned, it is true that teachers may receive theoretical training, but when you get to the classroom you put it into practice, and in the end you end



up excluding people because you don't know how to put that theory into practice (Workshop participant no. 1)

e) Lack of a critical attitude towards the education system, and lack of motivation and initiative on the part of some education professionals. Even today, the notion of the banking model of education formulated by Freire (1985), by which the educator becomes a mere repository of content to be transmitted and received by the student, remains current and is deeply-rooted in the system. This static conception of education is characterised by the absence of problematisation, which makes it difficult to question the current state of affairs in the social and educational spheres (Martínez Bonafé, 2008). When this approach to education becomes predominant, education can become a routine and alienating process, preventing education professionals from questioning the school's structure, organisation and culture, and the role they play within them. The lack of motivation and initiative inherited from the banking education approach can even lead to a lack of interest in everything that surrounds the educational process, including students.

... In three years he had been taught eight reading methods, so, well, any learning process takes a lot of work, anyone who is trying to get their driving licence can't learn if you keep changing the car. How do you expect a child to learn with eight reading and writing methods? (Carmen, mother, and Special Education teacher).

f) Outdated methodologies, structures, and school culture. The history of each school is a fundamental element in understanding the mechanisms of segregation and exclusion that occur within it. Despite the rapid pace of certain social changes, schools seem to be stuck in the past, repeating the same outdated patterns over and over again. Today's classrooms are no different in appearance from those of fifty years ago. And although there are truly valuable educational experiences, these continue to coexist with obsolete methodologies that are ineffective in addressing the needs of diverse students.

... Boring, passive classes cause suffering and lead to segregation, as opposed to interesting classes that are participatory and where curiously there are never inclusion problems. So the task is to transform the toxic systems that are causing so much suffering (Raul, teacher)

g) Excessive bureaucratisation and standardised psychological and pedagogical reports. Education has often been understood in terms of effectiveness and efficiency. Its quality depends on the extent and proportion to which pre-set objectives are achieved; but the relevance and pertinence of a school's culture, and its equity in access to learning is rarely questioned. Excessive bureaucratisation leaves little time for discernment and critique, and education professionals often become part of the school machinery with little or no questioning. Even standardised instruments and tests, such as schooling reports, seem to be designed to think for us, reducing complex

situations to a simple category. This causes the person to be deprived of their being, and denies many children the opportunity to gain their school qualifications.

... The reports were so standard that one report was found to be a copy and photocopy of another.

These reports are decontextualised, the context is forgotten, , and only the child is looked at or presented as being sick (Leonor, counsellor)

... My son's psychological and pedagogical report, which they gave me this Thursday, interestingly and strikingly fails to include a sentence from his doctor that says that he's autonomous to carry out the basic activities of daily living, from 2018, from this January. But they didn't forget to include a report from 2016 in which the person who sent it said he needs help getting dressed. I'm sorry, but that's not forgetfulness but a deliberate decision (Virginia, mother).

h) A conception of disability or any other excluding social category as a personal problem and as a defining feature of identity. The numerous stimuli from the environment lead human beings to simplify reality through the use of social categories that allow them to establish a certain order and internal coherence. These categories can become like watertight boxes where everything is decontextualised, fragmented and thus excludable. The main problem comes when these categories are shared and become part of the social imaginary, even become institutionalised. At this point social issues are considered personal problems, and when certain subjective interpretations, hidden under the cloak of absolute objectivity, try to be normalised and end up becoming social constructions, that can determine the lives and futures of those children who fall into this excluding social category. In many cases, this category ultimately makes up their main identity trait in the view of the school and society. This is when disabilities, and/or inequalities prevent other abilities and other features of identity from being recognised.

... The whole battery of reasons that the counsellor gave us to tell us that my son should not remain at the school were systemic problems, problems with their system, with the organisation of the school, with their student/teacher ratio, with teacher training, they were putting the problems of their system on our son's shoulders (Susana, mother)

#### 4.2. Effects of school segregation and exclusion

The universalisation of education and the demographic changes brought about by immigration have led to the concentration of increasingly diverse students in schools. However, the modes of schooling have not been the same for all, nor have the demands, expectations, and opportunities that the school has projected onto these children. The main cause is to be found in the segregation mechanisms that schools have implemented based on the socio-economic origin, cultural or racial

origin, gender, or even the disability of their students. All this has had a series of repercussions on the educational community that were discussed in the workshop. These included the following:

a) Teachers' uneasiness. The bewilderment and difficulties associated with increasingly diverse and changing demands and the social criticism that arises when these demands are not met can generate fear and unease among teachers (Esteve, 1987). This fear of facing new educational situations and diverse student causes some teachers to block and/or resist change, which prevents them from opening up to new ways of conceiving and engaging in the teaching-learning process.

... I come up against attitudes that are paralysed by fear, it is very difficult to get people out of their comfort zones. And families [are] desperate for their children to have high-quality education (Macarena, counsellor)

b) Families' suffering of and feelings of failure and powerlessness. The testimonies of the families who spoke at the meeting were particularly harrowing, and showed the exhaustion caused by the continuous struggle against a school system that discriminates against and excludes their children. The families agreed that few mainstream schools are committed to inclusive education, and the most common practice is to refer boys and girls with some kind of disability to special education centres or to address their situation in mainstream schools, but from the perspective of special education, instead of first offering them educational alternatives adapted to their needs. This often unsuccessful struggle generates a sense of failure and powerlessness in families, which sometimes leads them to take the blame for decisions that have not been freely taken by them, but were the result of an exclusionary education system:

... We gave up. I was very disappointed when I saw her in that situation, making play dough with one hand in the classroom. I was given the choice of either placing her in a dedicated classroom or taking her to a special education school. She is now in a special education school, she is very well cared for, very happy. My struggle for her social integration is still going on (Lola, mother, and primary school teacher)

When we got to school they wore us out. A psychologist told us we had to go to special education. So we went to visit all of these special schools and realised what you find there. And you say: 'I don't want that'. But there was no alternative. (José and Isabel, parents)

c) Dehumanisation and denial of the value of diversity. The workshop gave us first-hand access to the damage and suffering that school segregation and exclusion causes to students, families and many education professionals. The processes of discrimination and exclusion not only violate these

children's rights to education, but also strip them of their humanity, removing them from their personhood and imposing a label that objectifies them and reduces them to their disability. These are external elaborations that people with disabilities have little ability to modify (Ferreira, 2008; De la Rosa, 2008). At the same time, this label makes them a problem for the school, which misses the opportunity to see coexistence in diversity as a learning opportunity.

This space they call school begins to be forged like this; it is a place where every day less and less attention is paid to the needs of children, people are dehumanised and everything is commodified. And so we continue to have practices based on inequality, on pointing to difference as something negative, on singling out children who are not within the norm, and there are continuous demands to label children and get them out of the classroom a lot. Thus homogeneity continues to be rewarded. (Macarena, counsellor)

... To think that a boy or girl at a certain age has to be in this year, but if he or she does not meet certain requirements, he or she does not have to be in that course, or does not have to be in that school or in that classroom. We will have to think about what is happening there for us to have assumed that the school is above any child. (Nacho, brother, and researcher)

... In the end it is a violation of the rights of all children, because children with diversity have the right to be with others, and other children have the right to be with children with diversity. (Alexander, father)

d) Decreased educational attainment, expectations, and social inclusion of pupils. People at the meeting highlighted the low expectations that many education professionals have of children with disabilities; and they showed how, by focusing on their disability(ies) rather than on their abilities, these expectations often turn into self-fulfilling prophecies.

They also listed the difficulties and obstacles that the school system places in the way of these pupils so that they do not progress in their teaching-learning process and do not obtain their school leavers' certificate. At the same time, there seemed to be fairly widespread agreement on the discriminatory rationale underlying the psychological and pedagogical report and the schooling report. Participants were of the opinion that these instruments, far from offering advice and support to students, families, and professionals, are limited to naming the different difficulties or disabilities of the students who are subjected to such an assessment.

In the end the psychological and pedagogical evaluation serves to sentence you to not obtaining your school certificate; most of the times, if you accept that opinion it is like a sentence for you, and you finally end up in a special education school. And that is illegal or should be

illegal, right now it seems legal, because everybody gets there if you don't go to the Supreme Court and that shouldn't happen. (Fernanda, mother)

... it would be a pity if they were to take away the opportunity of being with what is today something essential for us, which is the reference group, that class that is an example of coexistence, which gives us lessons every day and that is what gives me energy every day. (Paula, mother)

Our son shouldn't have left the combined school, he shouldn't have because he belonged to the group, there was a sense of belonging not only on the part of my son, but also on the part of the others, because there were improvements in his behaviour when he was in the ordinary school. He behaved worse in the special education centre for many reasons. The only options they gave us was either that he should retake that year or go to a special education school, which we refused, and after a lot of effort he is now in secondary school. (Susana, mother)

The process of inclusion of these children in the social and educational environment is also marked by the discriminatory effects of these stereotypes and prejudices to which the people with disabilities are subjected in the school environment.

... Everyone should have the right to be in the same classrooms, all together, because when this is not the case we are pushing them aside and taking away the opportunity for the rest of the people to get to know them and learn to live together, and to understand them. And then of course, out there the world meets people with intellectual disabilities on the street and they don't know how to relate to them, what their needs are, what support they need, or anything else. As long as they are not there, they don't count, so I encourage you to keep fighting, because they need to be where everyone else is. (Susana, teacher)

What has happened for these children, who saw no difference between themselves and their peers with disability, 7 years later ignore them and don't feel that they are part of their world? (Carmen, mother)

## **5. Conclusions**

In 2018, 250 million children worldwide were not in schooling, representing almost one-sixth of the global population of school-age children (UNESCO, 2019). For them, the idea of inclusion should mean 'the opportunity to go to a school where they can begin to learn the basic skills that will ensure that they have decent adult life' (Echeita, 2007: 79). One of the aims of inclusion is that all children should be able to access education regardless of their characteristics and circumstances (Blanco, 2008 and Echeita, 2007). Consequently, education cannot be excluding on the basis of

personal, social, gender, cultural, ability or ethnic status, but must be seen as an opportunity for an enrichment of the educational process leading to a more just society.

Many families are involved in a constant struggle to ensure that their children attend mainstream schools and to keep them in the same class as the rest of their peers. A struggle that highlights their unequal starting position, since it is the system itself that violates the rights of these minors, by separating them from the rest.

This inequality is rooted in a conception of education as a privilege, which is, to a large extent, rooted in the medical model of disability, which sees disability as a personal problem caused by health reasons to be addressed through medical and rehabilitation treatment. From this point of view, disability is conceived as the main feature that defines the person; so it is necessary to train their behaviour in order to make these personal differences less evident in the eyes of society. The instrument used by this model to exclude a child from the regular school system or to refer them to a segregated classroom is the position resulting from specific psychological and pedagogical reports. They are used to judge whether children have special education needs, and different modes of schooling are proposed accordingly, as well as possible curricular adaptations and other specific aids and support resources. The main problem with this model is that it understands difference as a deficit, and segregation into separate groups or institutionalisation is often adopted as treatment, ultimately becoming a form of marginalisation and mistreatment (Palacios, 2008).

We should take a closer look at the symbolic conceptions that influence the way we view and interact with disability. We have learnt to see things from the perspective of an apparent 'normality', which corresponds to a social construction. Therefore, the main challenge is to make a paradigm shift, in which 'normality ceases to be the determining attribute in the identification of one's being, and particularity becomes the attribute par excellence for human understanding' (Calderón, Calderón and Rascón, 2016: 47). Standardisation has had a devastating effect on the construction of our way of thinking and conceiving the world. 'Difference has often been used to justify inequality, by associating the term with that which is 'not desirable', and this is conducive to discrimination, marginalisation, exclusion, etc.'. (*Ibid.* p. 54)

This constructed conception of normality has also served to legitimise school segregation of children with disabilities in many education systems, not only in Spain. For years, international institutions have been calling for implementing inclusive education, to provide these children with high-quality schooling, enable them to achieve a range of basic skills, reduce the impact of inequalities and focus on equality rather than on average scores (UNICEF, 2018).

The inequality suffered by students with disabilities in education is an irrefutable fact. This is not only indicated by international reports, which have stated that they are the group most likely to be out of school or to drop out before completing primary or secondary education (UNESCO-UIS, 2017), but also by numerous education experts and families who are fighting for inclusive education to address the needs of diversity. If we agree that education should address the individual differences of each child on the basis of equity, it cannot lead to different forms of segregation and exclusion. Hence the urgent need to initiate transformation processes that allow the social and educational inclusion of these vulnerable groups, 'which not only aims to improve the quality of schools from an inclusive perspective, but also addresses the necessary cultural changes to ensure that understanding, valuing, and guaranteeing the rights of all people, without discrimination, are part of the values and beliefs of the majority' (Marchesi and Hernández, 2019: 54). Ultimately, we are talking about a kind of quality that aims to develop the cognitive, affective and moral potential of all children to their full potential, and that recognises diversity as a source of enrichment.

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