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Empowering inclusive education: principles for excellence in teaching and lifelong learners

Wzmacnianie edukacji włączającej: zasady doskonałości w nauczaniu i kształceniu ustawicznym

Abstract

A long time ago educational policies started to develop different measures to offer students with educational needs the support required. However, society is each time more diverse and requires additional strategies to provide a real inclusive education. Most of the times institutions face up problems due to the lack of resources. For this reason, along this research an approach to empower inclusive education is examined. Principles for excellence in teaching and lifelong learners are promoted in a way to enhance all possible strategies to offer the attention students' diversity demands. The results show how stakeholder's prescriptions contribute to offer educational support and how inclusive education can be deeply developed in institutions. The new socio educative demands need specific principles, teaching methods and techniques that allow diversity abilities and skills in the classroom.

Keywords: inclusive education, excellence, lifelong learners, educational acts, school culture.

Streszczenie

Dawno temu polityka edukacyjna zaczęła opracowywać różne środki, aby zaoferować pomoc uczniom wymagającym wsparcia edukacyjnego. Jednak społeczeństwo jest za każdym razem bardziej zróżnicowane i wymaga dodatkowych strategii, aby zapewnić prawdziwą edukację włączającą. Najczęściej instytucje napotykają na problemy ze względu na brak zasobów. Z tego powodu badane jest podejście do wzmacniania edukacji włączającej. Zasady doskonałości w nauczaniu i uczeniu się przez całe życie są promowane w taki sposób, aby wzmocnić wszystkie możliwe strategie i zwrócić uwagę uczniów na ich różnorodność. Wyniki pokazują, w jaki sposób wskazania zainteresowanych stron przyczyniają się do oferowania wsparcia edukacyjnego oraz jak głęboko można rozwijać edukację włączającą w instytucjach. Nowe wymagania społeczno-wychowawcze wymagają konkretnych zasad, metod nauczania i technik, które pozwalają na różnorodność zdolności i umiejętności uczniów.

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja włączająca, doskonałość, uczący się przez całe życie, akty edukacyjne, szkolna kultura.

How to handle students' diversity in educational institutions

When dealing with diversity the starting point is focused on the prescriptions derived from the stakeholders. Once analyzed the different measures proposed, we should analyze how teachers implement the educational processes with students with educational needs. Obviously, the principles, values and objectives that are reflected in the School Educational Project must be coherent with the educational line of the Administration. It is not enough to establish pattern behaviors but it is a much more complex matter.

To be able to state that a school really develops inclusive education, the school has to combine in its Educational Project and its practice the education policies established by the stakeholders and the creation of a school community concerned with how to deal with multiculturalism, diversity and heterogeneity. This is only possible if teachers build the school reality from their daily interactions. In this way they share a culture which will undergo changes over time as actors or agents also shift.

The school, therefore, is a social construction of its members but it is conditioned by the ideological pressures that come from the macro-political level¹. These pressures are generated by the stakeholders who implement new education activities, methodologies and principles reflected in the legislation documents. But the common culture shared in a school leads to share values, attitudes and aims that must be related, in turn, and be compatible with those prescribed by the stakeholders. Otherwise, these actions would make no sense.

The inclusive school methodology should focus on the improvement of a way of learning based on realism, close to the students' focus of interest in order to increase their motivation and promote their autonomy in the development of school tasks as well as in the learning of educational values. First of all, it is essential that the school and the environment that is, the social reality that it belongs to, are in a close and constant interaction (life-long learning, functional learning...).

In this way, the teacher has to know, seek and properly use the possibilities offered by the environment, either in educational, social, cultural terms, tasks, resources, etc. This aspect is essential in the educational process as it determines the effectiveness of our action, and may increase students' motivation, by improving educational services for incoming students or completing the teaching-learning processes in real contexts through meaningful learning.

Second, the didactic process must be based on globalization as an essential methodological principle, as far as it is a mandatory enrollment period, and in so far as it is prescribed by current legislation. The contents that the student with specific needs of educational support works on must be closely interrelated with other curricular

¹ J.R. Soler, *La participación social en la construcción de la democracia, reto consustancial a la formación a lo largo de la vida*, Tornapunta, Madrid 2009.

areas. This means creating education materials and activities that proceed from the student's reality and which are developed through interdisciplinary projects. In this way, his/her motivation will increase as well as his/her perception of integration in the class group. Therefore, the tasks have to move towards interdisciplinarity, being developed through workshops, specific programs, stories, role-plays, etc.

Third, closely related to the principle of globalization, we highlight cooperative learning. Since the transmission of knowledge is conditioned by the students' diversity, it is necessary to promote the student's socialization. The social dimension of learning is implemented through cooperative learning, since it is a construction that we do not develop alone but interacting with others. Therefore, it has a social component.

The teacher, from the interpretation of his/her classroom reality, diversity and heterogeneity, from his/her background, will decide what to do -mediational paradigm centered on the teacher²-. He/she is therefore a "reflective planner" of the teaching-learning process. He/she abandons the standard models – typical of the traditional process-product paradigm – and understands that the teaching-learning processes have to be planned ahead with the aim to develop an initial assessment and provide students with adequate individualized attention.

Cooperative learning involves the development of cooperative skills in students that encourage and improve communication styles, which are essential especially in the disabled students in order to enhance their socialization³ in their group-class. This allows students of a group-class to assess the considerations of each one and to analyze, if there is any discrepancy, how many people agree, supporting other colleagues, showing feelings of respect, appreciation and so on. This learning methodology also involves the use of language as an instrument of dialogue and communication, by building confidence in students when it comes to expressing their opinions and minimizing the consequences that may pose conflict.

Fourth, so as to be cooperative, learning has to be based on a well-done classroom space distribution, according to the characteristics of the task and using the resources required. Therefore, the allocation of roles, resources and space will encourage the development of cooperative skills as well as communication styles. In fact, the direct correlation that develops between the tasks of instruction and classroom management⁴ brings new ways in the use of classroom spaces. The homogeneous or heterogeneous students' grouping either determined by teacher's

² Á.I. Pérez Gómez, *Las fronteras de la educación. Epistemología y Ciencias de la Educación*, ZERO, Madrid 1978.

³ R. Soler & T. Han, *The Language of Pedagogy Today: What are the New Teaching Challenges?*, Nova, New York 2018.

⁴ F. Doménech, J.A. Traver, M. Odet, M.A. Sales, *Análisis de las variables mediadoras entre las concepciones educativas del profesor de secundaria y su conducta docente*, "Revista de Educación", 340, pp. 473–492.

selection or through the teacher's instructions, conditions the interaction between students, their cooperation in learning and their socialization.

The classroom is a social space for exchanging experiences, culture, autonomy, communication and socialization. Thus the coexistence of students' heterogeneity and diversity must be improved⁵. In this sense, this social space ought to promote active participation of all students, interaction, exchange, dialogue, etc. Attitudes of acceptance or rejection may arise but it will be a teacher's task to ensure that these are transformed into bonds, self-knowledge and mutual learning. Thus, the development of guided learning processes will determine the classroom social environment⁶.

This constitutes the fifth methodological principle, as it is essential in the establishment of techniques, principles and strategies in the teaching-learning processes. The social classroom environment must be understood as the "ecosystem resulting from the multitude of interactions that are generated simultaneously and/or subsequently between all agents of the institution at the interpersonal, macrogroupal or microgroupal level"⁷.

The social classroom environment is an essential element in the establishment of interactions and cooperation among students. While a number of factors are involved in its configuration (such as the political-economic-administrative agents, social relationships, communication, culture and architectural features, temporal sites, etc.), its marked complexity provokes the generation of new instruments of mediation. These instruments follow models of social relationships dependent on instructional tasks, on the teacher's and student's roles, as well as in the classroom setting itself.

These relationships established in the classroom can be of cooperation, competitiveness, self-reliance, empathy, rejection, activity-passivity or equality-inequality. Proposed in a dichotomic way, they always set undoubtedly the prevailing culture of the institutions, its beliefs and interpretations of learning. Therefore, the classroom is not an enclosed space, but it is open to dialogue and interaction, in which knowledge is built from experience, reality and students' mediation-intervention.

In this sense, the teacher must foster a flexible social classroom environment, open to students' diversity, interests, abilities, skills and attitudes. In other words, it must promote interaction and cooperation among students as an essential element for learning. The group distribution in the creation of the social classroom environment to develop tasks will condition the social relationships in students and thus promote

⁵ H. Daniels & P. Garner, *Inclusive Education. Supporting inclusion in education systems*, Kogan Page, London 1999.

⁶ Booth T. et al., *The Index of Inclusion: developing learning and participation in schools*, CSIE, London 2000.

⁷ D. Sparks, *Designing Powerful Professional Development for Teachers and Principals*, National Staff Development Council, Oxford 2002.

the inclusion or not of disabled students. If learning is the acquisition of new knowledge from the establishment of social relationships, education experiences that are generated in that social classroom environment are essential for the acquisition of concepts and the integration of students in society and ultimately in public life⁸.

Sixth, the teacher should promote the principle of activity. That is, the student has to be the main protagonist of his/her own learning, which appeals to his/her intense cognitive activity, more or less accompanied by motor or manipulative skills and always facilitated by a logic gradation of complexity in tasks. The student becomes an active element in the teaching-learning process. This implies that the teacher does not fulfill the role of transmitting knowledge; s/he rather acts as a facilitator of the student's learning⁹. The student then learns to learn.

This methodological principle, especially widespread in current times with the introduction of the eight basic competences in the Spanish context, allows students to learn and build knowledge with the teacher's input. Thus, independent learning is promoted. If our social classroom environment is adequate, and disabled students feel included in the class-group, they can share and build knowledge together.

However, the teacher should encourage student's activity. If not, there is no learning. If we want a stimulating and attractive task, we have to focus on the student's centers of interest, on his/her reality. Therefore, the teacher must find out the students' concerns and build new relationships with the contents of the curriculum. To promote the principle of activity in the student, to provide his/her with an active role in the development of tasks, implies to select those that arouse more motivation, which are tailored to his/her skills, cognitive level and addressing towards self-learning¹⁰. Tasks involving classroom research, experiments, debates, brainstorming are useful in this regard.

Seventh, students must reach a meaningful learning. He/she has to be able to integrate his/her prior knowledge to the new acquisition, so that the latter will be meaningful, both in the receptive and constructivist learning. Only if this condition is reached, can we talk about functional learning and enable the principle of learning to learn: "The main education paradigm to be followed should be to learn to learn and learning by doing". Meaningful learning is necessary to transfer knowledge to real life situations which involve problem-solving tasks"¹¹.

⁸ K. Merseth, *The case for cases in Teacher Education*, "Proceedings of the Conference on Case Method", Charlott, 1990.

⁹ S.G. Howe, *On the proper role of state institutions for the disabled*. Speech given at ceremonies on laying the cornerstone of the New York State Institution for the Blind at Batavia, Genesee County, New York, Henry Todd, 1966.

¹⁰ A.N. Perret-Clermont, *Interagir e connaître: Enjeux et régulations sociales dans le développement cognitif*, Delachaux et Niestlé, Neuchâtel 1988.

¹¹ R.S. Feldman, *The social psychology of education: Current research and theory*, University Press, pp. 153–171, Cambridge 1986.

Eighth, the principle of individualization must also be considered. In order to provide students with an individualized attention we may start from their level of cognitive competence, their previous knowledge, pace of work, etc. (zone of proximal development¹²).

This involves a system of reinforcements, rewards, incentives... to the achievement of the learning aims that must be immediate and very tight to their interests. The teaching-learning processes must be adapted to the characteristics of each student, as they are different and have different cognitive processing. Similarly, their interests, motivations and concerns are far from each other; thus teaching practice should include an individualized instruction tailored to each student's needs.

In general terms, the cards, individual work, concept of mapping, etc. are of great help in the process of individualized instruction. It is through the implementation of cooperative learning where individualization is made compatible with this methodological principle, by diversifying the teaching-learning processes. These kinds of tasks improve both the socialization and inclusion of disabled and immigrant students and the acquisition of learning.

Promoting inclusive education: teaching principles

Particularly, the previous ten methodological principles analyzed must be developed by using different teaching resources, different means involving different languages (auditory, visual, audio-visual, body language, etc.). In this sense, we stimulate all students' senses, not just language. Especially relevant are Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in this education context. The computer, the digital interactive whiteboard are very motivating for these students, by allowing them to individualize their learning pace.

Moreover, classroom organization is especially relevant in the processes of school inclusion. Students with special education needs must feel comfortable. The classroom distribution may favor communication between the teacher and the students. There are different ways to group students in the classroom. The most suitable are essentially flexible students' grouping formed by appointment of the teacher, students' free choice, or with heterogeneous groups (always keeping in mind the gender) or homogeneous in terms of learning levels.

Groups can develop the same task or carry out differentiated tasks, which are then pooled. In this sense, work in pairs is also an option. Obviously, given the students' characteristics, the teacher may then establish working groups to be more

¹² L. Vygotsky, *La mente en la sociedad: el desarrollo de las funciones psicológicas superiores*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1978.

effective for the purposes of socialization because they foster close relationships between their members.

However, depending on the aims to be pursued in each teaching situation and the characteristics of the task, a clever combination of all the options outlined above seems to be a most suitable strategy to keep a social classroom environment. However, besides organizing the classroom, the teacher should consider organizational criteria, such as teamwork and cooperative learning and coordination with other collaborating agents (coordination of teachers with families and professionals involved in the education process).

The measures of attention to diversity that the current legislation implements through different stakeholders (inspectors, education policy makers, school advisors, etc.) are meaningless if limited to fragmentary interventions both at the Elementary and High education levels. The inclusion of students with specific educational support needs to be shared at school, in the shaping of the micro-political level. If it is only prescribed by the macro-political level and even not considered, schools are unprotected towards the new incoming students. Teachers should share common policy principles, goals to be addressed, and also methodological guidelines related to students' diversity¹³.

On the other hand, parents have to participate and support the educational process. Education policy should encourage this process of inclusion, not only as keywords that govern the legislation texts, but by providing human and material resources. Many schools need support from Administration, not only in terms of staff but also by considering external resources in order to support the teaching-learning processes.

Schools are mainly characterised by a diverse education reality which is quite difficult to be assumed. They do not only need more material resources, but often human resources are not sufficient or the most adequate ones in such an increasingly diverse and multicultural environment as the current one. In this sense, schools have to undertake common principles to effectively manage the centre through a coherent and coordinated action of all members of the education community. This view must be shared by stakeholders to support education in each stage.

Discussions

Roughly speaking, the methodological principles that help in the development of inclusive school are far from the prescriptions and interests of the stakeholders, as the latter do not know the current needs of school. They are not teachers in any classroom, and everything they propose is more theoretical than practical.

¹³ E. Avramidis & B. Norwich, *Teacher's Attitudes toward Integration/Inclusion. A Review of the Literature*, "European Journal of Special Needs Education", 2(17), 129–148, 2000.

Secondly, the teacher's work does not only focus on the students' assessment. He/she has to plan his/her teaching-learning processes, create a syllabus design, consider the students' diversity to propose specific measures to deal with that heterogeneity, etc. When planning the didactic processes, we must do it permanently throughout the learning process (continuous assessment). In this sense, we get the necessary feedback to introduce any changes that may be considered. In other words, teaching is "a decision-making" process, where the teacher is a permanent "decision maker".

When we develop a syllabus design, we decide what to do in the classroom, on the basis of considering the students' characteristics. When carrying out our didactic programming, and depending on the incoming needs, we will consider whether we continue with those aims or we change them (formative assessment). This decision must be taken on the fly, while we develop our teaching-learning processes in the classroom, when we finish the session, the didactic unit, etc. Thus we can assess the learning achieved (final assessment) and once and again we get a new feedback from our programming for the next didactic process.

Certainly, the learning process of each student is different and so is the result. The knowledge that each one conquers is his/her cognitive construction, peculiar, possibly unique. The student is the mediator par excellence of his/her own learning, the main protagonist. While he/she is learning, a set of interests come into play, closely related to his/her previous life experiences. The knowledge he/she already possesses, and also the cognitive processes that enable his/her to activate them, depends on the input he/she receives.

This is the fundamental premise of the mediational student-centered paradigm, in line with the approaches of the cognitive psychology, which understands the teaching-learning praxis as a process that should facilitate the construction of knowledge and the development of student's processing information strategies, both in his/her individual work, and in cooperation with his/her peers, and under the teacher's guidance and support.

Thirdly, schools that develop an inclusive education should refine the concept of teaching and learning and attune it to the real achievement of the students' priority aims. Only then can we say that the implementation of an innovative methodology in the treatment of compensatory education contributes to overcoming inequalities in education, to spread schooling to disadvantaged, marginal contexts, and to deal with the growing multiculturalism of the classroom.

However, other actions to be undertaken by the whole of the school community could be considered to help in this process of education intervention. For example, the creation of discussion groups, composed by staff members, and in other cases representatives of parents and other education agents, would feed a situation of permanent critical analysis of the school educational development process.

The internal and external assessment of the School Educational Project would complement the performance of different education agents with the input of external

agents, experts in education innovation, with the participation in dissemination and discussion forums on education innovations (with gypsy students, immigrants, disabled...). Those discussion forums could be developed both in school and online. Finally, the participation of teachers in life-long learning processes to improve their teaching skills, get more strategies when dealing with diversity, etc.

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