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Keywords

Inclusion, inclusive education, educational change, inclusive schools

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Abstract

Inclusive education is approached from three dimensions: the creation of inclusive cultures, the production of inclusive policies, and the development of inclusive practices. In this paper, the relationship between these three dimensions is discussed and it is explained how their combination can lead to educational change and evolution in the development of inclusive schools.

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Introduction

The pluralism that characterizes a modern society is reflected in the classroom. The modern school is therefore called upon to manage diversity and to meet the needs and particularities of pupils (Evangelou & Moula, 2016). This effort to restructure schools to meet the diversity of the student population is evident from the large number of relevant declarations and official documents around the world. A typical example is the Salamanca Statement and the framework of action for special education (UNESCO, 1994). The Salamanca Statement introduced the term "inclusive education" and proposed the creation of a "School for All". The purpose of inclusive education is to overcome the obstacles that

make participation difficult and to enhance the learning of pupils, regardless of nationality, gender, socio-economic background, performance or disability.

Another initiative in the same direction is the *Index for Inclusion* (Booth & Ainscow, 2011), which is a guide designed, on the one hand, to assess the achievements of school units in terms of inclusive education and, on the other hand, to support the development of appropriate inclusive practices. It is used worldwide by many primary and secondary schools with the aim of achieving self-criticism and self-improvement from the perspective of three dimensions: cultures, policies, and practices. Throughout this process, the schools adopt the appropriate activities that highlight, after thorough and detailed control, their weaknesses and discover how the education and socialization of pupils can be improved (Braunsteiner & Mariano-Lapidus, 2017; Sanchez et al., 2018).

Schools are required to adopt inclusive policies and inclusive practices and cultures, although this change is not an easy task. There is often a gap between theory and practice. The changes are slow and few, while the obstacles to achieve inclusive education are many (Haug, 2017). There is no successful recipe that can be applied to schools to make them more inclusive. Each school is unique, has its own student population and operates in a society with a specific culture that must be taken into account in this change, otherwise any attempt will lead to failure (Bualar, 2016).

School culture, educational policy and practical inclusion

Inclusive education is a constant effort of the "ordinary" school to meet the needs and particularities of pupils and to create a climate of respect and mutual understanding among its members (Soulis, 2008). The specific goal is considered complex and requires a combination of school culture, educational policy, and applied educational practices.

The school culture includes the ideology of the organization, that is, the set of values, beliefs, traditions and perceptions that are adopted over time among the members of the school community (Hatzipanagiotou, 2008). It affects the way that school operates and transforms inclusive policy into practice (Schein & Schein, 2017). In some schools, the concepts of social justice and equal opportunities prevail, while in others, deep-rooted stereotypes and prejudices are found, which are an obstacle to the development of more inclusive practices (Stylianou, 2017). In the first case, where attitudes towards diversity are

positive, inclusive policies are adopted and effective practices are implemented that enhance the acceptance and equal participation of student learning. In the second case, pupils are directly or indirectly excluded, due to elements of diversity. Therefore, values are directly related to culture and shape attitudes, behaviors, and the desire for commitment on a continuous path to inclusion. The starting point for changing the school culture are values of respect for difference and empathy. The lack of these values is the biggest obstacle towards a school achieving inclusion, while their acceptance turns out to be its most valuable ally (Educational Manual, Inclusive Schools Programme, 2019).

The education policy is related to the measures taken by the state to achieve its educational goals and to ensure inclusion. The state forms the current institutional framework, which proposes the possibility for all children to attend the school in their neighborhood and receive qualitative education, regardless of particular characteristics, in order to characterize education policy as inclusive. Many countries, since the UNESCO conference in 1994, have adopted inclusive education in the context of the global vision for educational policy (Magnusson et al., 2019); they have accepted and

ratified global declarations and international conventions, which promote the value of inclusion and implement inclusive educational policies. In this context, these countries adopt appropriate curricula and textbooks without stereotypes, adapted to the needs and interests of pupils.

The recipient of the above is every teacher, who is called to apply the inclusion in practice, namely, to adopt the practice that ensures equal participation. At the same time, differentiated teaching is applied to children who have access to school. Teachers, who see diversity as a challenge rather than a problem, adapt to the needs and profiles of their pupils with differentiated teaching, in order to ensure the improvement of the pupils' learning outcomes.

Significant difficulties in achieving inclusion often arise. This is because policy-based access and practice-based participation are completely independent. This may be the best national school inclusive policy for children's access to school, but if children do not receive an education that meets their needs or in which participation is possible, then this policy does not have the desirable positive results. There is also the possibility that the opposite happens. In

other words, the school curriculum, as well as teachers, may have a strong inclusive basis and plan teaching so that children can participate and learn. However, these efforts will not be as effective, if the policies that determine access do not support the inclusion of pupils (Educational Manual, Inclusive Schools Programme, 2019).

In conclusion, it could be said that culture, policies, and practices are interrelated. This connection is emphasized by the Index for Inclusion, in which these three dimensions are represented by a triangle, the basis of which is culture, since culture can either support or undermine any attempt for educational change. Therefore, starting from the change of school culture, the effort for the adoption of a more inclusive educational policy, as well as the implementation of inclusive practices, could begin, in order to achieve the creation of a "school for all" (Gerosimou, 2012).

The triangle in educational change

The cultivation of inclusive culture, which influences the principles and strategies of a school, is a necessary condition for the establishment of inclusive education. According to the Index for Inclusion, the development of an inclusive culture requires, on the one hand, the creation of an inclusive community and, on the other hand, common values among its members. In an inclusive community any individual is welcome, pupils work together, teachers work with one another and with pupils, and there is respect and mutual appreciation in relationships. In terms of values; democracy, justice, respect for human rights, equality, and solidarity are essential to ensure that all forms of discrimination are eliminated and to strengthen pupils' self-confidence and active participation leading to student success (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

A crucial role in the foundation of inclusive culture is played by teachers, who should eliminate racist beliefs and prejudices of the past, accept diversity and work collaboratively to meet the needs of children. In order to change the school culture, it is not enough to change the teachers, but it is necessary to change the beliefs and attitudes of the members of the school community (Papavasiliou-Pyrgiotaki & Pyrgiotakis, 2015). Pupils, parents, teachers, and school leadership should work together in this direction. In particular, the school leaders are the ones that with their attitude reshape the school culture, inspire and lead the rest of the school community to more inclusive paths (Charalambous, 2016).

An inclusive leader strengthens the participatory governance model, shares responsibilities and tasks with members of the school community and strengthens initiative. With team spirit, collaboration, active participation of the members of the school community and decision-making together, the value of each member is recognized, while at the same time a sense of collective responsibility is created (McLeskey & Waldron, 2015). The school leader takes care to eliminate all forms of discrimination and exclusion, strengthens relations between members, listens to and respects the voices of everyone. The school leaders function as a model, contribute to the development and success of all members and lay the foundations for a progressive and democratic school with an inclusive culture (Ainscow et al., 2013; Koronakis, 2016). The school leaders are the pioneers in the implementation of inclusive policy. They clearly formulate and effectively communicate inclusive policies to other members of the educational community, while at the same time opposing any practice that reinforces marginalization (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). Their goal is the implementation of national educational policies, adapted to the needs and existing conditions of the specific school.

Therefore, a necessary prerequisite for the implementation of inclusive education is that those in charge of educational policy not only aim to increase the knowledge provided, but also to provide equal opportunities to pupils (Chatzisotiriou, 2013). In order to achieve this, the definition of the subjects and the coordination should be done centrally, although it should be possible to adapt the curriculum and set the goals in each school, depending on the composition of its student population and the peculiarities of the local community to which it belongs (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). In this way, the curriculum will be perfectly adapted to the needs of its pupils, and learning will be better promoted. The inclusion highlights the need to provide equal opportunities for access to school and provides resources so that educational goods are available to everyone, without discrimination and restrictions. Effective management of diversity in practice, therefore, requires sufficient financial resources not only for building installations, but also for the necessary logistical equipment (Ainscow, 1999). In order for the inclusive policy to be successful, it is necessary to train staff in inclusion issues. The objectives of the training and the duties of the teachers should not only be communicated, but at the same time they should be provided

with the necessary training and support, to complete the work successfully (Done & Andrews, 2020). The aim of educational policy is to constantly seek new strategies, educational practices and tools to achieve all the short-term and long-term goals of eliminating discrimination and supporting diversity (European Agency for Development in Special Education, 2009).

For the successful provision of inclusive education, it is necessary to adopt inclusive practices, which will transform in practice the principles of inclusion to support diversity and provide equal learning opportunities for everyone (Causton-Theoharis & Kasa, 2015). The first concern of a teacher should be to create a climate of acceptance in the classroom, where everyone is welcome and an equal member of the team. In such an environment, the creation of interpersonal relationships between pupils and socialization is enhanced. Pupils gain confidence, actively participate in the learning process, and are driven to build knowledge and academic success (Messiou, 2008). The cooperative relations of the teachers with the parents of the pupils lead in the same direction. It has been found that parental involvement in school events, as well as the constant flow of information to parents by teachers, contributes positively both to the achievement of teaching objectives and to improving the behavior of pupils (Mylonakou-Keke, 2009). However, the opening of the school should not be limited to the families of pupils; it must be extended to society. The contact of pupils with society is enhanced by teaching in informal learning environments. When teaching takes place beyond the classroom, in places related to the interests and needs of pupils, the active participation increases, while at the same time pupils learn to work as a team. Especially pupils who experience a kind of marginalization should participate more in the learning process and have equal learning opportunities (Angelidis, 2011).

Another inclusive practice is the diversification of teaching, as mentioned above. Differentiated teaching recognizes the particularities of each pupil and adapts the lesson to meet student needs (Vastaki, 2010). Every pupil has value, and the expectations for each student are high. Successful diversification requires training, experience, and time for preparation by the teachers, so that the lesson can meet the interests and special characteristics of each pupil individually. Diversification is related not only to the content

of the course, but also to the process, the means used and the learning environment. For example, the use of new technologies enriches and improves the learning process, while the application of collaborative techniques eliminates marginalization and cultivates a climate of mutual respect and understanding (Stasinos, 2016).

Collaboration in an inclusive school is not limited only to pupils, but also concerns all members of the educational community and the school itself. Teachers exchange good practices, views, reflections, and plan the learning process together, to empower the pupils. Collaboration networks are also created between the schools. Schools that have a similar population composition or show similar socio-cultural characteristics face similar problems. The creation of cooperation networks contributes to the change and improvement of the school (Chatzisotiriou & Angelidis, 2018).

It is, therefore, found that, despite the fact that the path of schools towards inclusion seems particularly difficult, in fact targeted changes in educational practices can contribute in this direction (Schwab & Hessels, 2015). However, in order to develop inclusive practices, on the one hand, the national educational policy must be inspired by the principles of inclusion and, on the other hand, the school culture must allow the proper implementation of principles of inclusion.

Conclusions

The diversity of the pupils' population that characterizes modern schools and the great variety of the needs of pupils, not only in the cognitive but also in the social level, imposes the transformation of schools, in order to adapt to the new data by fighting all the phenomena that lead to learning and social marginalization. Changing schools is not an easy task. At the same time, it presupposes the elimination of beliefs that perpetuate and reproduce discrimination in the school environment, the adoption of educational policies that will allow pupils, without exception, to access quality learning and, in addition, the implementation of practices that will ensure active participation and equal learning for everyone.

The collaboration of all members of the educational community (leadership of teachers, parents, and pupils) with the aim of redefining the values and attitudes that define the school culture can lead to significant change. Cultural change will pave the way for more inclusive policies and practices. As a result, each pupil will have equal opportunity to achieve the same

learning outcomes. The path to inclusion never ends (Angelidis, 2011); it is a continuous and systematic effort to restructure the educational and learning processes that aim not only to acquire real knowledge but also to open the schools to society, adopting alternative ways of learning, coexistence, and functionality.

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