



Inclusive education. Analysis and reflections in Ecuadorian Higher Education

La educación inclusiva. Análisis y reflexiones en la educación superior ecuatoriana

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Resumen

El acceso a una educación en igualdad de condiciones y oportunidades de aprendizaje es una aspiración y un compromiso que debe ser asumido por todos los gobiernos e instituciones públicas y privadas. A nivel internacional, y específicamente en Ecuador, se han generado leyes y acuerdos que han apoyado el proceso de educación inclusiva en todas las etapas. El propósito de este artículo es realizar una aportación sobre la situación y los retos que plantea la educación inclusiva en Ecuador, con especial incidencia en el ámbito de la educación superior. Para ello se ha recopilado y seleccionado, con criterios de relevancia, los acuerdos internacionales y la normativa nacional que afecta a la inclusión. A través de este análisis hemos podido constatar el avance en el tratamiento de esta a nivel internacional y su reflejo en la normativa nacional. A pesar de ello, transformar las políticas, la cultura y las prácticas de las Universidades para atender a la diversidad sigue constituyendo un reto para todos los actores implicados. Como principales conclusiones de este trabajo se establece la necesidad de avanzar hacia un modelo de universidad basado en los principios de la inclusión educativa ya establecidos, no solo como una cuestión imprescindible para mejorar los procesos de calidad, sino como un elemento clave en orden a construir sociedades más justas, democráticas y equitativas.

Descriptor: Educación, inclusión, diversidad, normativa, universidad, sostenibilidad.

Abstract

Access to education on equal terms and with equal learning opportunities is an aspiration and a commitment that must be assumed by all governments and public and private institutions. At the international level, and specifically in Ecuador, laws and agreements have been generated that have supported the process of inclusive education at all stages. The purpose of this article is to make a contribution on the situation and challenges posed by inclusive education in Ecuador, with special incidence in the field of higher education. To this end, international agreements and national regulations affecting inclusion have been compiled and selected, with relevant criteria. Through this analysis we have been able to note the progress in the treatment of inclusion at the international level and its reflection in national legislation. In spite of this, transforming the policies, culture and practices of Universities in order to attend to diversity continues to be a challenge for all the actors involved. The main conclusions of this work are the need to move towards a university model based on the principles of educational inclusion already established, not only as an essential issue to improve quality processes, but also as a key element in order to build more just, democratic and equitable societies.

Keywords: Education, inclusion, diversity, regulations, university, sustainability.

1. Introduction

Exclusion occurs in all contexts and situations of daily life, sometimes in a direct and perceptibly way and in others in a subtle way. Sometimes, situations where exclusion occurs are socially accepted in a way that it is difficult to perceive it even by those who suffer it. The truth is that the advancement of democracy and the higher perception of human rights make inclusion a relevant issue in all sectors of our societies and especially in education.

In the field of education, exclusion of fact or law can be used (Parrilla, 2002). Sometimes there may be legislation that mentions those who are entitled to education, but it was not always necessary to establish it. Exclusion can occur in promoting an education for certain elites of society, being the majority excluded from educational processes. But beyond economic reasons, exclusion has its origin in the non-valuable difference. What is different is rejected, someone who does not fit into the canons of “normality” do not have any possibility in society.

Inclusion in education entails attitudes of deep respect for differences and a responsibility to make them an opportunity for the development, participation and learning. The design of educational processes that place inclusion as a vital axis requires the participation of many social actors. UNESCO (2006) conceives education as a cohesion factor as long as it considers the diversity of people and human groups, avoiding being a factor of social exclusion (Calvo & Verdugo, 2012). Inclusive education is based on a system of determined values that are welcomed to enable the process of teaching and learning to be initiated (Colmenero, 2015). It is therefore a change of approach to accommodate the flexibility that the difference requires.

The right to education is an unquestionable human right in any modern society. It was established in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and developed in a multitude of subsequent documents, such as

the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1976, the Convention on the Rights of the United Nations 1990, the Millennium Development Goals in 2000 or the 2014 Sustainable Development Goals, among many others. The Declaration of Human Rights states that “education shall aim at the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms; understanding, tolerance and friendship between all nations and all ethnic or religious groups” (United Nations, 1999) will be fostered and four basic characteristics are defined for this purpose: availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability.

It is not possible to delimit the right to education under these premises taking as criteria a disability or diversity. Inclusion involves removing, reducing all barriers to learning (Booth, 2000) and consequently moving towards a fairer, more inclusive society for all. Taking into account the diversity present in societies, the school and educational institutions should be a positive reflection of this diversity by supporting the work of parents, teachers, managers, new professionals and social agents who have the same ideal (Corral, Villafuerte, & Bravo, 2015), but it should be noted that the student’s unique physical presence does not represent that the institution becomes an inclusive space, this is just the beginning of the inclusive education process.

In Ecuador, in the 60s and 70s although education was characterized by a high appreciation of the public school (Isch, 2011) it can be said that it was an exclusionary model. The school accepted only children considered “normal” while the “different” found neither the necessary access nor itineraries according to their needs. Educational exclusion will be reduced over the years as well as the design of reforms implemented by social and educational policies, whose main objective was to transform educational institutions in the country.

Policies generated at the international level by organizations such as: Regional



Office for Education for Latin America and the Caribbean (OREALC), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Organization of States (OEI), as well as at the national level: National Secretariat for Planning and Development (SENPLADES), National Council for Equality of Disabilities (CONADIS), National Secretariat for Higher Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (SENESCYT), Council for Higher Education (CES) among others, aim to promote respect for diversity as a fundamental value of society; all this considering that the only way to transform the education system is with the participation of teachers, students, authorities and families. For Booth (2000) an education with warmth involves significant transformations to the education system, “in its cultures, policies and practices” (Booth, 2000, p. 11).

International recommendations and related public policies with education have made progress in generating mechanisms to advance in inclusion, looking at diversity from a more comprehensive framework, highlighting the traits of student badges: differences in race, ethnicity, gender, language, religion, learning styles, personal status, artistic ability, manual and intellectual abilities (Muñoz, 2009; Herdoíza, 2015; Gallegos, 2015). From this point of view, the aim is to determine the impact of the regulations around educational inclusion, regulations that guarantee an education focused on respect for individualities and diversity.

2. On inclusive education

Booth states that “all human beings are different, no two identical beings. These individual differences should be recognized in educational processes” (Booth, 2000 p. 9).

An extensive path has been taken from the denial of the right of various human groups to education, women, individuals with disabilities, people from different cultures, girls and children, children of displaced people or migrants, until

the current situation of partial or full admission at different levels of the education system. “The journey has not been unique (in fact, there are different paths and routes to inclusion) nor linear (it has developed at different rhythms and times according to people and countries)” (Parrilla, 2002, p. 11).

Inclusion has not had a one-on-one conception in its references, rather it has evolved with different senses and theoretical frameworks. In principle, it emerges by a new social conscience, which UNESCO initiates and promotes, on inequalities in the human rights treaty, paying special attention to differences in respect for education as a right. In this sense, inclusive education is understood as a dynamic, open and flexible process that recognizes and appreciates diversity in children and adults without making distinctions of any kind. To include means implementing an education system based on diversity, equity and participation in an ordinary environment (Calvo & Verdugo, 2012; Echeita & Navarro, 2014; Colmenero, 2015; Fernández & Pérez, 2016). For UNESCO (2004) educational inclusion means developing schools that serve all, whatever their characteristics or difficulties; for their part Booth and Ainscow (2002) conceive it as a set of processes that aim to remove or reduce barriers that do not allow everyone to participate.

In the educational field all citizens must be guaranteed a quality education. Educational institutions are responsible for making real the right to an education that deploys the full potential of each person, considering diversity from a more comprehensive approach, and emphasizing that the student is part of an agglomeration composed of differences (Booth, 2000; Muñoz, 2009; Echeita & Navarro, 2014). In this context, public policies linked to education have progressed in the mechanisms that promote educational inclusion, on the basis that the future of society is the result of its education, so that society and educational institutions have to bet on offering a quality education (Colmenero, 2015; Herdoíza, 2015).



2.1. International Agreements

Humans have created international agreements and commitments that drive educational inclusion, recognizing the right to educate oneself in diversity with equity and quality. These are:

- The right to education is noted in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which recognizes the human value of education, based on solid foundations not only moral but also legal. Education is an undoubted tool for defending and sponsoring other human rights. The exercise of freedom, enjoyment of safety and an adequate environment are strengthened by a quality education. The recognition of the intrinsic human value of education has been consolidated into major conventions that emphasize the importance of the full inclusion of people with diversity (Valenciano, 2009).
- In 1975, the UN General Assembly's Declaration of the Rights of Disabled People established rules on equal opportunities for people with disabilities. Recognition of rights to all is consolidated, urging the community not to exercise distinction based on race, sex, language, color, religion, creeds, origin, socioeconomic status, birth or any other characteristic (Parra, 2010). For Muñoz (2009), this statement promotes policy changes to assist the integrated education of students with disabilities in regular schools. This statement seeks to offer basic rights to people with disabilities, and its greatest interest lies in preventing disabilities and stimulating rehabilitation (Parra, 2010).
- The Warnock report, prepared by Mary Warnock, for England, Scotland and Wales published in 1978, indicates that education is a good, and it must be recognized as a right of all, and that educational needs (SEN) are common for all students who require different specific attention and resources (Warnock, 1990).
- The Universal Declaration of the Rights of the Child 1959: Establishes equal rights for all children, recognized as a person, without exception, with their interests and needs (United Nations, 1959).
- Jomtien Conference, World Declaration of Education for All, 1990, set out the objective of "education for all", with the aim of motivating equality and universal access to education, taking attention to diversity as a value and as a potential for the advancement of society (UNESCO, 1990).
- World Conference on Special Educational Needs: Access and Quality. Salamanca, 1994: It states that schools should welcome all children, without observing their personal, cultural or social conditions, and it is essential to teach all students within the regular education system, and it states that classrooms are the most powerful measure to combat segregationist attitudes, this allows the creation of host communities, which enables the construction of a society with education for all (United Nations, 1994).
- International Consultative Forum on Education for All 2000, held in Dakar, this space reaffirms the need to pay attention to access to education and the inclusion of historically marginalized and disadvantaged students. To achieve this goal, education systems must be comprehensive, mainly considering basic learning needs and promoting equity among all humans (OEI, 2000).
- In December 2006, the General Assembly, in its resolution 61/106, adopted the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol. This protocol constitutes an international treaty recognizing the rights and obligations of States parties to promote, protect and ensure compliance. Likewise, the equality of all human rights and fundamental freedoms that must be guaranteed to all people are



recognized through an inclusive education system at all levels (United Nations, 2008).

- More recently and although in general, the 2030 Agenda places education as the engine of all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and sets out a target, number 4, which focuses specifically on education “Ensuring inclusive education, quality and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations, 2015). This objective is developed in concrete targets that must be achieved by all countries and where inclusion is an essential vector.

These conferences and international agreements enable education to be shaped as an ongoing effort to respond to diversity. Thus, education has gone from being a privilege of few people to being a right of all (Clavijo, López, Mora, Ortiz & Cedillo, 2016).

In the case of Latin America and the Caribbean, a number of “structural gaps” must be overcome, such as gender, race, ethnicity and population inequality, the near-zero effectiveness of public social inclusion policies, the poor quality of health and education services, (...) (United Nations, 2015), inequality that provides an additional effort to make inclusive education a reality at all levels of the education system, especially in higher education as a mechanism for correcting social inequalities (De la Cruz, 2012; Herdoíza, 2015; Vessuri, 2016; Fernández & Pérez, 2016).

2.2. Inclusive education in the country. Legal basis

While inclusive education in other Latin American countries such as Mexico, Brazil, Chile already has a path on inclusion, Ecuador has addressed this topic at the beginning of this century. The term inclusive education is relatively recently used and is still in the process of interpretative and practical consolidation (Clavijo et al., 2016). It started in the 40s and was characterized by the care, in which a medical approach

prevailed. Responsibility for educational care to students who had no place in the school system remained in parents and individual organizations who, on their own initiative, set up educational care for children with disabilities. This care was based on charitable criteria (Vicepresidencia de la República, 2011).

In the 70s started the period of institutionalization. Several public and private bodies assumed responsibilities in the areas of education, health and social welfare to meet and correct the needs of the population with disabilities. A rehabilitative approach determined by curriculum adaptation for each of the disabilities is subsequently adopted. These curricula are formalized through ministerial agreements and are parallel to those of regular education, although educational institutions work in an isolated way and differently from regular education (Vicepresidencia de la República, 2011).

Important actions were developed in the 60s to 80s such as the publication of ministerial regulations (Organic Education Law, Education and Culture Act of 77, Special Education Law and Regulation) and regulatory agreements regulating Special Education. All this legal basis presents an inclusive orientation and for the first time “the term of inclusive education appears, but mixed with that of integration” (Rosano, 2008, p. 60); despite this mixture that in principle makes education appear to be embedded in educational integration, allows inclusion in the country to make solid steps towards inclusive education.

Global events in the 90s (World Declaration of Education for All, Declaration of the Disabled, World Education Forum, among others) also push Ecuador to direct education from an inclusive perspective. Measures are generated to help students be cared with the same opportunities. The generally accepted idea that only students with special needs need support is left behind, recognizing that any educator may need support to access the official curriculum.

In 2003 the Code of Children and Adolescents came into force, which argues that,



before the law, all girls, boys and adolescents are equal regardless their status (Congreso Nacional, 2003). The willingness of the Ecuadorian State to promote inclusion in educational institutions by adopting diversity as a positive element is evident. Later, with the political situation of the time, the ten-year plan for education was approved in 2006 through national popular consultation with more than 66% of the votes. The eight policies in this plan have an inclusive approach and seek to ensure the education of all people, regardless the personal, cultural, ethnic, social and disability situations. The lines present to universalize initial education and basic general education, improve infrastructure, quality and equity, revalue the teaching profession (SENPLADES, 2012), among others, constitute policies that assist in the promotion of inclusive education.

The Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador adopted by plebiscite in 2008 sets objectives linked to progressively improving educational quality, based on rights, gender, intercultural and inclusive approach, seeking to strengthen the unity in diversity, and above all ensuring the permanence and completion of studies, as well as examining other forms of diversity by analyzing the capacity of each of them in their contribution to build relationships of coexistence, equity, dialogue and creativity (Constitución, 2008). Education is embodied as a right of people throughout their lives and as a duty that the Ecuadorian state cannot do without. It is a priority area of public policy.

Education will focus on human beings and will ensure its holistic development in the context of respect for the human rights, the sustainable environment and democracy; it will be participatory, obligatory, intercultural, democratic, inclusive and diverse, of quality and warmth; it will drive gender equity, justice, solidarity and peace (Constitución, 2008, p.16)

Additionally, with the enactment of the Intercultural Education Act (LOEI, 2011), the constitutional rights held by people with dis-

abilities are effective, ensuring inclusion in educational institutions and removing barriers for learning. It is recognized as holders of the right to quality, secular, and free education at elementary and high school, as well as to a lifelong education to all the inhabitants of Ecuador (...). To receive comprehensive and scientific training, which assists in the full development of their personality, capacities and potentials, considering their rights, fundamental freedoms through the promotion of gender equality, non-discrimination, recognition of diversity, participation, freedom and cooperation. This law promotes each being "treated with justice, dignity, without discrimination, with respect for their individual, cultural, sexual and linguistic diversity, their ideological, political and religious convictions, (...)" (Legislación, 2011, p.18).

LOEI promotes equity and inclusion, it guarantees all people access, permanence and culmination in the education system. It promotes inclusive policies through the creation of affirmative measures and an inclusive school culture, motivating equal opportunities for communities, people, nationalities and groups (Legislación, 2011).

Later, the Disability Act (2012) was approved; with this, the Ministry of Education must assume some responsibilities by allowing children and young people with disabilities to integrate into regular education. A key aspect of this law is the recognition of the right to education, establishing that the State manages and ensures that those with disabilities have access and complete the National Education System and the Higher Education System (CONADIS, 2012).

At the same time, the National Plan of Good Living (PNBV) is created, which includes suggestions from public policy to develop components of inclusion, social protection, integration and territory. This plan strengthens the idea that the educational system identifies and values all people, especially priority care groups, and recognizes the plurality of communities, people and nationalities (SENPLADES, 2012).



The PNBV includes knowledge, through the recognition of equal opportunities, the signs of behavior for social interaction, as well as their relationship with the nature, fundamental rights, intercultural dialogue, among others (SENPLADES, 2012). In the face of this new philosophy, it is a policy of state to legitimize and respect sociocultural diversity by eliminating all forms of discrimination, basic actions that must be promoted from all educational institutions and above all strengthened from the Institutions of Higher Education (IES) (Herdoíza, 2015).

In the “A whole life plan” (2017-2013), which specifies the public policy of the Ecuadorian territory, it is established as the responsibility of the State to provide a public, free and universal education; as well as to restate higher education as a public good and creator of development. Higher education is a space for the integral and inclusive training of all; hence, the challenge is to improve the quality, as well as the access and the significant increase of coverage (SENPLADES, 2017).

3. Inclusive education in Higher Education

With regard to Higher Education, the Higher Education Act (LOES) is enacted in 2010. The aim of the law is to define its principles and guarantee the right to quality higher education that points to excellence, through universal access, permanence, mobility and egress without any difference. It is based on the principle of equal opportunities seeking to guarantee to all equal possibilities, without differences in gender, sexual orientation, beliefs, ethnicity, culture, political conviction, socioeconomic status or disability (Asamblea Nacional, 2010).

In this context, overcoming inequalities and exclusion are perhaps the most pressing challenges of these times for Latin American countries and the world. It is precisely Higher Education institutions the ones with the challenge to contribute to the transformation of soci-

ety, through the training of professionals with knowledge and skills that allow them to provide answers to the needs of social development and help build a citizenship prepared for the human coexistence and well-being (Asamblea Nacional, 2010; Fernández & Pérez, 2016).

Placing inclusion as a main axis of education, especially in the university system means promoting more equitable and fair societies. As UNDP notes on its website: “The goal of achieving inclusive and quality education for all is based on the belief that education is one of the most powerful and proven drivers for ensuring sustainable development”. Training in any professional activity seeks to contribute to the knowledge and promotion of human rights, as well as to know the democratic and equality principles between women and men, solidarity, environmental protection, universal access, thus fostering a culture of peace (United Nations, 2015).

While inclusive education must be taken on an individual basis, Ecuadorian institutions of Higher Education will implement actions that will be translated into the society (Asamblea Nacional, 2010; Herdoíza, 2015); all careers must guarantee that their new professionals are not left out of social action to ensure the good living stated in the Constitution. Professors will help in the training of competencies which would allow to find solutions to specific problems of their career, assuming lifestyles that recognize and respect diversity. There are some studies such as Rodríguez (2004), Espinosa, Gómez, and Cañedo (2012) or Fajardo (2017), which point to Ecuadorian universities as responsible institutions in the formation of personal and social behaviors which safeguard the dignity and equality of all students, claiming inalienable rights from the recognition and respect of their diversity, working with values such as non-violence, health promotion, which are inescapable values for inclusive educational development.

The University of Cuenca, aligned with the Constitution of the Republic, the OBV and



the All-Life Plan, has institutional policies of affirmative action such as policies and practices aimed at eliminating all kinds of discrimination by ensuring equal opportunities for all human groups, all this through the Department of the University Welfare, with the “format that regulates the process of educational inclusion at the University of Cuenca” (2017), seeking to ensure higher education as a right of all.

The work in attention to diversity and the format are intended to sensitize and involve all members of the university community to recognize diversity, removing barriers that limit learning and guarantee entry, permanence and completion of their studies to all students entering the University (Universidad de Cuenca, 2017).

Hence, inclusive education is a basic reference in the regulatory order of the country’s education system, linking to the recognition of the dignity and equality of people as part of their inalienable rights. Inclusive education is oriented in compromising the university action in overcoming differences by compensating the different inequalities (SENPLADES, 2017), these aspects stated in the Whole Life Plan seek to contribute to forming a twinned society, based on the recognition and respect of human diversity, through a regular framework of rights and shared duties, a society that strives to equate the opportunities of all, especially for those who are in a more vulnerable position for different reasons (Herdoíza, 2015).

4. Challenges and Opportunities in Inclusive Education

The rules on inclusion in the country aim to promote the true meaning of inclusive education, understood as a fundamental right and as an element that determines educational quality. The path has already begun, the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean in recent years have made significant progress in the development of education, extending the durability of elementary (compulsory) education; expanding

coverage at different levels; designing curriculums that respond to diversity; improving the provision of materials and infrastructure and, above all, executing different actions that contribute to the teacher’s training (Vessuri, 2016). Beyond the government action, the responsibility of institutions of Higher Education entails to respond with appropriate new approaches and responses that can address the challenges of diversity, expanding coverage at different levels; designing curriculums that respond to diversity; improving the equipment and the actions of institutions as well as their professionals (Parrilla, 2002). Facilitating access to an institution of Higher Education means that teachers, students, authorities and other staff of the institution implement institutional actions to serve the whole population with quality and responsibility (Blanco & Duck, 2010). Beyond administrative issues, inclusive education must struggle with certain attitudes of people involved in the educational process. It is a question of applying the postulates of the culture of diversity in the public university (Juárez, Comboni & Garnique, 2010).

Taking into account the above, and in line with international contributions and the Ecuadorian legislation, a series of actions to be carried out in the institutions of Higher Education are considered, mainly:

- Institutional: Create physical, material and structural conditions to guarantee access and permanence of students regardless their characteristics. This involves establishing and maintaining accessible infrastructures that remove physical barriers that would restrict participation in the learning processes.
- In addition, it is desirable to provide financial support for students with diversity in order to ensure the completion of their university studies. Additionally, implement human resources to support the Department of University Welfare and the generation of an inclusive culture.



- Training: With regard to teachers, the idea is to establish specific training and the necessary support to improve the educational practice. The aim is to look for the individual awareness and also to provide teachers with tools to work on quality inclusive education.
- Specifically, it is important to design and implement Inclusive Education Master programs to promote the respect and appreciation of diversity in the university community through the training on inclusive education.
- Research: implement and promote research lines on Inclusive Education: inclusive policies, cultures and practices that make it possible to improve the teaching practice; thus, providing a response to the diversity of students.

The responsibility for enabling a truly inclusive education must be committed to all and not only by educational institutions. Providing resources is a responsibility that no government should avoid doing.

Conclusions

In recent years, the regulations have recognized the need to train in inclusive education in university contexts. In the face of social diversity, the challenge is to achieve an inclusive, quality education; therefore, the university must respond to this social demand by incorporating it into its structures and curricula.

Effective inclusion first happens when access to knowledge is democratized, where equal opportunities that allow the development of the skills required to act in society are also provided; inclusion is much more than access to education, it implies the real possibility of concluding it, there can be no inclusive education if people and society do not begin to comply, at least, with the current legislation.

A quality university education will observe effectiveness and efficiency as main aspects of training policies and will try to ensure the right to education. The idea is to have institutions of Higher Education that will accept and value the difference, recognizing fairness and equal opportunities. In practice, all people involved in higher education must defend this true sense of quality education by working from university classrooms with the training of professionals with a curriculum in which knowledge about diversity is taught in all careers and academic programs.

Education is a main human right, and it is essential for the progress. It allows all human beings to live a healthy, creative and meaningful existence. It is a catalyst that seeks to consolidate inclusive societies from university spaces, not only declaring it valuable in institutional documents, but training professionals with the capacity to make decisions and face the complex life in this 21st century.

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