



SYSTEMIC METHODOLOGY FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICIES IN AREAS WITH ACUTE SOCIAL PROBLEMS

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Abstract:

In this work we attempt to set a framework of proposals for the inclusion of pupils in schools of areas with acute social problems. The necessity to adopt educational policies for inclusion is highlighted in the findings not only of scientific research but also of international organizations, despite their different ideological content every time. These proposals recognize the central role of teachers, the necessity for their training and the achieving of broader cooperation. In this respect, the development of inclusion policies can be facilitated by the application of systemic methodology.

Keywords: inclusive education, systemic methodology, educational exclusion

1. Introduction

According to UNESCO (UNESCO-IBE, 2008), education systems worldwide are challenged to provide effective training to everyone and to limit dropout and low learning outcomes that mainly affect the most disadvantaged social groups. It is characteristic that similar problems are not only faced by the pupils of developing countries but also of the most developed ones, where there are sufficient financial resources. Similarly, it is a key objective of United Nations (UN) to ensure fair and inclusive quality education for everyone, aiming by 2030 to eliminate disparities between the sexes in education and to ensure equal access to all education/training levels for vulnerable social groups, including persons with disabilities, indigenous populations and children (UN, 2015).

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Dealing with the exclusions from the educational process requires the adoption of policies that address economic, social, political and cultural factors that cause and promote actions of inclusive education (UNESCO-IBE, 2008). In this context, the concept of inclusion is not limited to pupils with special educational needs but attempts to reduce/eliminate social exclusion because of different race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability, by assessing education as a basic human right (UNESCO-IBE, 2008: 5). In other words, the inclusive education:

- focuses on the educational results of each and every pupil;
- deals with the welfare of all pupils;
- sets the transformation of schools into organizations, ready and willing to welcome this pupils population.

The ultimate goal of this vision is no pupil to be left outside school and learn to live together with each other (Barton, 2012: 54).

2. Framework

In this paper we follow the UNESCO-IBE approach (2008) on inclusive education as an ongoing process, which aims at offering quality education for all, while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, the characteristics and the pupil learning expectations and communities, excluding all forms of discrimination. In other words, inclusion differs substantially from the assimilation, posing questions of social justice, equality, human rights, non-discrimination (Barton, 2012). At the same time, reference is made to the findings of international organizations with a different frame of reference, which recognize the necessity to promote policies of inclusive education:

- Specifically, UNESCO functions as a global think tank, playing a regulatory role in promoting international cooperation, setting standards of international agreements and contributing to the dissemination and exchange of information and knowledge, with the aim of developmental cooperation (UNESCO Hellas, n.d.).
- Similarly, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), starting from a market economy based on democratic institutions, collaborates and provides assistance to governments for the sustainable economic development (OECD, 2016).
- Finally herein, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) is an independent and self-governing organization supported by the European institutions (European Commission; European Parliament) and the member countries (EASNIE, 2016).

The development of policies and guidelines for inclusive education is certainly a complex task that involves many diverse factors. To facilitate the determination of proposals and practices in a holistic and complete manner, the application of systemic methodology is presented herein, according to the relevant conceptual tool of OMAS-III (Papakitsos, 2013).

3. Systemic Methodology

The application of systemic methodology via OMAS-III in Education, generally considered as a social system, has been proposed and/or conducted in a variety of diverse educational issues that include:

- Strategic and operational planning in local educational administration (Papakitsos et al., 2017);
- The interrelation of labour-market to vocational education (Papakitsos, 2016a);
- Conflict management in school-context (Papakitsos & Karakiozis, 2016);
- The development of curricula in tertiary education (Papakitsos, 2016b);
- The designing criteria for educational websites (Papakitsos et al., 2016a);
- The development of practices for teachers' extracurricular training (Foulidi et al., 2016);
- The application of blended-learning in educational projects of career guidance (Papakitsos et al., 2015);
- The teaching and learning of writing essays for pupils of limited related performance (Makrygiannis & Papakitsos, 2015).

Functionally, OMAS-III is compatible with the most comprehensive conceptual framework of Systems Inquiry (Banathy & Jenlink 2001), that includes tools for the systemic analysis of educational and social phenomena, among others. According to OMAS-III, the systemic inquiry is based on the *journalist's questions*, regarding the study of a system that is conducted by classifying the related factors in the seven corresponding categories: causal ("Why"); outcomes/output ("What"); resources/input ("Which"); spatial ("Where"); temporal ("When"); regulative ("How") and monitoring ("Who"). The application of OMAS-III for the study of policies and guidelines regarding inclusive education will be demonstrated, next.

3.1 Causal Factors

The causal factors ("Why") describe the overall context, like the dominant ideology of inclusive education, the reasons of educational exclusion and the necessity of the intended activities. Thus and according to the terminology used by international

organizations, the debate on inclusive education has exceeded the narrow research/academic boundaries by constituting a political tool for the development of disadvantaged or under-developed regions and vulnerable social groups. However, Education as institution is linked to political practices, being an area of intense social conflict as highlighted since the mid-1980s (Fragkoudaki, 1985: 17), when governments tended to adapt schools to the needs of economy because of the increasing international economic competition. The raising of the number of pupils, who were enrolled in all levels of education, created problems regarding their integration in the labor market. On the other hand, in modern reality it cannot be ignored that the implemented educational reforms in recent years, along with inclusive education, had the market conditions as their starting point and they were based on the hegemony of neoliberal ideology (Liasidou, 2015).

Moreover, in modern society there is a separation of learning from the broader social and cultural context, which enlarges the gap of underprivileged and vulnerable pupils and displays these results in various physical, mental or psychological deficits, ignoring sometimes the social or educational inequalities that exist (Dyson & Kozleski, 2008). In this context, the neoliberal practices in Europe increasingly dominate education and the inclusion policies are formulated in terms of “market economy” (Dyson, 2005). As a result of these practices, the school becomes increasingly inhospitable for quite a number of pupils, who are considered incompetent to comply with the requirements that include the curriculum and a pedagogy oriented to the needs of the “ideal pupil” (Harwood and Humphrey, 2008).

Indicatively, it is noted that the formation of curriculum (Goodley, 2007) and the introduction of school effectiveness indicators is based on the notion of “ideal pupil model”, which prevails in neoliberal reasoning (Dyson, 2005). Moreover, policies are developed that focus on any pathology of pupils (i.e., through medical reports), without seeking the authoritarianism relations and the inequalities that prevail in the educational process (Liasidou, 2012). This means that schooling becomes more of a field where pupils are divided according to their ability to contribute to the neoliberal demands and expectations of the global economy (Lakes & Carter, 2011).

3.2 Output Factors

The output factors (“*What*”) describe the required outcomes that are influenced by the causal factors and dictate the selection of concepts and practices for implementation by the rest of them. Accordingly, the major international organizations present their proposals about inclusive education.

In particular, UNESCO (2013) formed a framework of principles, based on the international bibliography, for the support of inclusive education and the promotion of teacher's training in inclusive education, which is summarized in the following:

- It is the educational system that complicates the inclusive education and not the pupils. Addressing barriers to inclusive education requires a systematic approach, which comprises: (a) identifying the educational barriers; (b) exploring strategic solutions to obstacles and (c) actions to implement changes to the system. On a practical level, differentiated individual and group projects are proposed that will enhance the fun, experiential learning and undertaking of initiatives, positive discipline, multilingual teaching, equal treatment of girls and boys and development of accession skills for pupils with disabilities.
- Diversity should be regarded as strength and not as weakness. Commonly applied teaching methods are only suitable for pupils with specific skills (e.g., teacher-centered didactics favors those pupils who are more effective in listening and memorizing).
- Teachers need training and support to implement learner-centered teaching methods, as well as for the adaptation and development of relevant curricula. They also need training in the understanding and use of evaluation practices. Accordingly, educational institutes should also use a common framework for the evaluation of learning.
- Teachers should be supported in order to assess the individualized needs of pupils and to recognize the obstacles that exist, as well as be given internship opportunities as part of their training programs.
- Young teachers need constructive and ongoing supervision and support by trainers and mentors. These trainers of teachers must be associated with schools and school communities of teachers, so as to derive the necessary information/experiences.
- The inclusive education requires a supportive environment and teachers need guidance and expertise on how to develop and use supportive networks within schools and school communities (e.g., other teachers, parents, etc.).
- Undergraduate students that are going to work in inclusive education it is effective to develop action research practices, in order to better understand teaching and learning and to make the necessary adjustments.

Similarly, OECD proposes a framework of actions for schools and pupils that exhibit socio-economic disadvantages, aiming at a broader economic growth (OECD, 2012), that includes:

- Reinforcement and support of school administration (leadership) through the implementation of appropriate programs for preparation and support.
- Configuring of a supportive school climate and learning environment that promotes the development of a positive attitude in the classroom, the teacher-pupil interaction, the pupils with their peers' interaction and the avoidance of disciplinary means. It also suggests the development of information systems for the detection of pupils with learning disorders, the search of supportive counseling services, mentoring or vocational guidance and the formation of smaller classes and smaller schools for a more effective teaching and learning of disabled pupils.
- Improvement of the quality of educational work, through the relevant training of teachers in specific learning conditions, guidance to new teachers and providing of supportive working conditions.
- Effective learning strategies in the classroom, through pupil-centered teaching that will follow, though, the curriculum and assessment practices. Also, the development of a culture that promotes high expectations of success.
- Connecting schools with the families of pupils and the local community. Specifically, when the parents of pupils are less involved in their children's education, due to economic and social reasons, it is important to encourage positive attitudes towards school, in order to reduce absenteeism, the probability of dropout and to enhance the performance of pupils. This is achieved by improving and diversifying the school-family communication practices and by providing clear guidance on how they can better support their children. At the same time, to encourage the involvement of community members in the educational process can help in improving the educational outcomes.

The need to change the dominant pedagogical thinking in a direction that will involve all and not only most the participants requires both variations and another educational context (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). The previous required goals can be achieved through the adjustment of the rest of the factors towards relevant educational practices, in accordance with the international bibliography.

3.3 Input Factors

The input factors (*"Which"*) describe the *"raw material"* of the studied system. In particular, we firstly refer to the prime factor of an educational system: the pupils, along with their accompanying social features, cognitive background, physical condition and pedagogic needs. Obviously, a successful policy of inclusive education must take into account all these features. Other input factors are: the infrastructure (building facilities);

didactic equipment (labs, libraries, learning manuals/books, available instruments and technology); financial resources, both regular and alternative (Papakitsos et al., 2016b).

3.4 Spatial Factors

The spatial factors (“*Where*”) can be described in various manners, depending on the nature of the system. In the present analysis, the spatial factors represent specific issues of classroom that facilitate inclusive education.

In terms of classroom, a number of good practices are implemented, in accordance with the international guidelines and the standardization of inclusive education programmes, undertaken by the project INCLUD-ED Consortium (Flecha, 2015) that includes variations of pupils in the composition of classroom, such as:

- Heterogeneous classes with reallocation of human resources. It consists of specific groups of learners (e.g., with special education needs or immigrants) and their support can be provided by teachers with the participation of family or community members, in order to keep the pupil in a classroom of general education.
- Separating pupils in the classroom. For example, different teachers are responsible for different heterogeneous groups of pupils, within the classroom of general education. This model is used for specific topics (e.g., language and mathematics), it allows the class to be organized differently and it reduces the pupil-teacher ratio.
- Inclusive option. The separation of pupils is not based on their abilities but on their preferences, providing equal opportunities so as not to limit their educational and social opportunities.

In heterogeneous grouping, there are not any distinctions made in the classroom on the basis of ability or individual school performance. The existence of heterogeneous grouping contributes positively to both the cognitive and social/emotional level of pupils, cooperation of all pupils in a classroom and cooperation between other classes based on a common topic (Boaler, 2006; EADSNE, 2005; Rytivaara & Kershner, 2012).

3.5 Temporal Factors

The temporal factors (“*When*”) describe issues of proper starting and finishing time, duration and scheduling: annually, monthly, weekly and daily. Accordingly, the relevant guidelines for inclusive education propose the extension of learning time. It is implemented mainly for pupils that live in socially deprived areas or belong to minorities. It may include: the extension of daily time at school beyond the normal working-hours; family support activities through tutoring at school or at home;

additional educational activities after the normal working-hours, either at school or in holiday periods.

3.6 Regulative Factors

The regulative factors (“How”) describe the conditions, theories, rules and guidelines that regulate the function of the system. The relevant proposals include an individualized inclusive curriculum, accompanied by the application of teaching methods that facilitate learning, in order to achieve a higher cognitive level. Considering these teaching methods, the proposed practices include collaborative teaching, collaborative learning, collaborative problem-solving, heterogeneous grouping of pupils, effective teaching and adoption of alternative learning strategies. Specifically:

- Collaborative teaching implies cooperation between teachers in classroom, as well as cooperation with teachers outside the classroom or other professionals, in order to create a supportive framework for improving the confidence of pupils, enhancing the diffusion of information and avoiding unnecessary mobility. In addition, through cooperation with colleagues or specialists, any issues of teachers’ isolation can be coped with. Examples of relevant practices include the existence of a *School Support Team* (involving: Principal, Deputy Principal, educational counselor, learning support teacher, inclusion teachers and liaison teacher with home/school/community) and regular weekly meetings (EADSNE, 2005; 2011; 2012; Flecha, 2015; OECD, 2010).
- Collaborative learning, where pupils help each other through one of their flexible grouping system, in order to improve their knowledge and their socio-emotional level, without limiting the more capable pupils. Such examples include the existence of dissimilar pairs or teams of three (with the distributed roles of tutor, pupil and/or observer that provides social reinforcement), where each pupil gradually assumes all the roles. This approach helps to improve the self-esteem of pupils and stimulates social interactions within the group. The result of this practice is that pupils, who best know the needs and language of their classmates, are able to explain whatever issues, based on shared lived experiences. At the same time, empathy is developed among cooperating pupils (Black-Hawkins, 2012; Cesar & Santos 2006; EADSNE, 2005; 2011; 2012; Flecha, 2015; OECD, 2010; Meister, 2012). Respectively, both family members and people from the community can be involved in the educational process of pupils, thus having increased learning outcomes for all stakeholders. Especially mentioned are the learning communities in Spain and the lifelong learning centers in Malta

(Flecha, 2015). These programmes focused on promoting literacy among family members, adult education and cultural activities (e.g.: reading lessons; arithmetic; ICT based on knowledge voids; needs of families, like activities especially designed for mothers, in places where they feel comfortable and able to speak freely). Similarly, discussions took place in areas of interest for pupils and their families.

- Collaborative problem solving through agreed rules by all pupils in a context of incentives and disincentives. Particularly at the beginning of the school year, a *class contract* is recommended, where teachers and pupils will be actively involved and the parents will agree on the operating framework and the incentives/disincentives posed. Similarly, regular meetings are proposed between teachers and pupils for reaffirming the established rules through class councils and weekly school assemblies involving pupils/teachers/parents (EADSNE, 2005; Flecha, 2015). Also, the existence of joint committees (with teachers, pupils, parents and community members) positively operates to make decisions about key school activities, like not only for solving regional problems but also for improving infrastructure and essentially dealing with organizational matters (Díez et al., 2011; Flecha, 2015).
- Effective teaching, through the implementation of the standard curriculum, which ensures a uniform framework for all pupils, as well as customized training programs, where necessary. Teaching includes experiential and group work for every pupil (Blatchford et. al., 2003; EADSNE, 2005; Koutrouba et al., 2006; OECD, 2012; UNESCO, 2013). Specifically, it is proposed to diversify projects and curricula, so as to meet the individual needs of each pupil, along with the diversification of teaching methodology (Marzano et al., 2001). Indicatively, it is suggested: to highlight the most important points of a course (summary); a homework assignment to better consolidate the curriculum; the use of graphics during teaching (Marzano et al., 2001). Accordingly, gradual learning with both mandatory and optional activities and cognitive mapping, where an idea/definition is depicted graphically, can work positively (Meister, 2012). Feedback is also an effective technique, especially when it includes standards of correct responses, so pupils can identify their mistakes (Black & William, 1998). Finally, the existence of a work plan within a specific timeframe can work positively. In this case, binding tasks are set, classified as mandatory, optional or supplementary. Pupils can work on a weekly basis, individually or in pairs/groups, at selected topics. In parallel, pupils can freely choose working topics, on a regular basis, as part of a differentiated course. Examples of free

working topics are: individual projects, interviews by specialists, learning games and daily or weekly work plans (Meister, 2012).

- Alternative learning strategies, where pupils are taught how to learn, how to solve problems and how to acquire responsibility for their own learning. Indicatively, the example of Sweden is mentioned, where pupils are responsible for their working time, daily timeframe, learning objectives and how to achieve them (EADSNE, 2005).

3.7 Monitoring Factors

The monitoring factors (*"Who"*) describe the impact of management in a social system, which in this case is the impact of educators towards the achievement of the required outcomes (see section: Output Factors). The previously mentioned ideological conflicts (see section: Causal Factors) are not implemented in a vacuum but in the classroom, bringing the focus of the debate into the role of teachers, who are trying to respond to challenges and questions that are raised urgently sometimes. Thacker et al. (2002: 21-21), give such indicative arguments:

- *"Although I want to divide my time to all my pupils, there are some of them that require ever greater share, which does not seem fair;"*
- *"some pupils cannot attend the class because there is someone who annoys/interrupts/causes noise;"*
- *"the existence of such pupils in a classroom of general education undermines my job;"*
- *"I feel that I am not a suitable teacher for such cases;"*
- *"problems are created regarding my relationship with the team;"*
- *"extra effort and extra work is required on my part."*

Questions regarding the durability of teachers of general education in inclusive education are raised. On research findings of the international bibliography, most teachers feel an excessive load in inclusion cases (Vaughn et al., 1996), they feel frustrated (Elshabrawy, and Hassanein, 2015) and are less motivated regarding their professional development (Corbett, 2001; Reid, 2005). Similarly, general education teachers usually make minor modifications in their methodology of teaching in inclusion classes (Bender et al., 1995).

A first attempt to address these issues in order to improve their strength is that teachers may ask themselves a number of questions for each pupil (Thacker et al., 2002: 32), as:

- *"What is positive about him/her?"*
- *"What is he/she good at?"*
- *"What does it scares/bothers me about him/her?"*

- *“Do I see a child or tags/labels that I put?”*
- *“Can I offer myself what it takes?”*
- *“Can I manage my emotions?”*
- *“How do I usually speak to him/her?”*
- *“What kind of interactions may he/she have with adults?”*
- *“What kind of interactions may he/she have with his/her classmates?”*
- *“Who does he/she get along better with and why?”*

For having though long term effects, an integrated approach is required that include a comprehensive training program for educators, which will prepare them for having the necessary confidence and skills (Alexiadou & Essex, 2015; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). According to a technocratic concept, a structured training program (for teachers) in inclusive education should include: educational methodology, pedagogical approaches, teaching practices, internship and the prospect of lifelong learning/training, by integrating professional development information, evaluation and quality assurance (UNESCO, 2013).

4. Conclusions

This work is an attempt to record a framework of proposals for the inclusion of pupils in the school environment, in areas with acute social problems. In particular, it is noted that a school should serve as a learning community by promoting collaborative and peer learning, collaborative problem solving, heterogeneous grouping of pupils, effective teaching and adoption of alternative learning strategies. Undoubtedly, these proposals are neither a panacea nor an exhaustive list of the recorded bibliography. Additionally at the implementation level, social dialogue is required along with adaptation to the existing socio-economic environment, based on the ideological context of the challenges of educational reforms. In any case, the central role of teachers, the need for their training and the development of a different context, where there is active cooperation of all members of the educational community (i.e., teachers, pupils, parents and society), is recognized. For the achievement of the above goals, the application of systemic methodology facilitates a holistic inquiry of inclusive education policies and thus a more effective determination of the relevant conditions and the required activities.

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