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How Inclusive Education Becomes a Community Project: A Participatory Study in the Northwest of Spain

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Abstract

This paper shows how a participatory study on inclusive education was designed and developed in a town in the northwest of Spain. The methodology included the development of collaborative inquiries at intra-school, inter-school and local levels. It was designed by following the principles of participative and community-based research. This study demonstrates diverse ways in which different educational levels face inclusion; the value of collaboration between agents and institutions for innovative thinking and practice; and the need to develop further and wider research connecting participatory research and community engagement movements to systematic research into inclusive education.

Keywords: *inclusive schools, education for all, participatory research, community-based research, collaborative inquiry*

Introduction

The article summarizes research (funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, ref. EDU2011–2928-C03–01) carried out at the University of Vigo (Spain), on all the infant and primary schools and some local educational agencies, in a small town in the northwest of Spain. The paper sets out to illustrate and discuss the journey developed in the different institutions participating in the study to achieve a more inclusive education (IE). The study is grounded on two research traditions: community engagement research (Blank, 2005; Bottrell

& Goodwin, 2011; Cummings, Dyson & Tood, 2011) and participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). This conjunction of approaches entails a new role for researchers and a fundamental role for schools and the community in the design, implementation and evaluation of collaborative inquiries aimed at promoting inclusion. Nine schools and diverse municipal associations and services from “A Estrada” took part in this process, on the basis that education and community development must be considered as linked and intertwined. Although most of the literature places schools at the heart of inclusion, it is clear that inclusion cannot be confined within the school. The need to study inclusion as an interschool and community process is increasingly being taken on board.

This study contributes to the strengthening and improvement of our understanding of how inclusive processes are built from such a viewpoint. More specifically, the aims of the study were:

- to map the content and analyse the processes of change inside schools in which teachers and other educational agents, through collaborative inquiry actions, undertake, develop and evaluate within-school plans to maximize IE.
- to map the content and analyse the processes of change between schools in which different school agents, through collaborative inquiry actions, undertake, develop and evaluate inter-school plans to maximize IE.
- to map the content and analyse the processes of change between schools and the local community in which diverse community educational agents, through collaborative inquiry actions, undertake, develop and evaluate local activities to maximize educational and social inclusion.

Research Methodology

Research General Background

As mentioned above, the reference frameworks for this paper are the community engagement model and participatory action research. The first of our references is consistent with the broad international agreement on the need to consider that IE does not depend on, nor will it be achieved by, simply improving or increasing participation and collaboration of professionals and stakeholders within schools, but rather between schools and their communities. Also, the grounding in participative action research attempts to answer the assumed need to consider inclusion as a process that should not be built as a technology (Allan & Slee, 2008), but rather as an on-going process that needs to be undertaken, considering the voice, the

thinking and the action of those engaged in it. The participatory action research approach assists participants in critically investigating their reality, analysing it and then undertaking constructive changes. Teachers, parents, community agents and marginalised people could be involved in the collaborative production of knowledge in pursuit of answers to the question of inclusion.

This way of thinking about the potential of participatory research has been taken into consideration in recent years not only by critical scholars or movements but also by funding bodies such as the European Union or the OECD (cf., diverse examples in Edwards and Downes, 2013). One of the most expressly recognised collaborative and participative strategies is the development of teams of participants in learning communities (Hord, 1997; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace & Thomas, 2006). These are communities that join professionals and stakeholders with a common commitment to the improvement of their own practice. Communities of practice can be developed in a single institution or composed of members of different organizations, as pointed out by Wenger & Snyder (2000). In our research, we particularly deal with the development of learning communities able to develop collaborative inquiries and projects.

Other successful studies and proposals emphasizing participatory processes that promote collaboration between schools and between schools and communities that inspire our research are: *Success For All* (Slavin, Madden, Chambers & Haxby, 2009), and *Education Action Zones* and *Excellence in Cities*, with schools in underprivileged areas, be they inner-city or rural, as a strategy for improvement (Ainscow & West, 2006). Also, the *Great London Challenge*, the *Great Manchester Challenge* or the *Berlin One Square Kilometre of Education* can be viewed as studies exemplifying framework linkages and connections between schools and their communities to promote school and social development (Ainscow, 2015; Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick & West, 2011).

Despite their individual characteristics, these undertakings share some fundamental points that are especially relevant to our study. All of them recognise diversity as an educational value that must lead to an equitable and qualified education for all students. Each scheme develops interaction between the schools and other local educational institutions, through networks, associations and diverse groups. Finally, all of them invite stakeholders (principally teachers, families, students and local agents) to actively participate in change management. But not one of them has connected community engagement and participatory research.

Bearing this in mind, the two fundamental starting points for this research are:

- The assumption of inclusion as a democratic and progressive social and educational challenge, which needs to be analysed with a research frame-

work able to harness their participatory nature. This calls for a kind of research that critically engages in the participation of all stakeholders and assumes the value and opportunity of alternative, bottom-up, processes of knowledge production in social sciences.

- The assumption of a community focus to research and develop inclusion. Every institution and context is viewed as a space with its own culture, identity and meaning that are constructed and shared by the community. In this manner, schools are considered as a public urban and political area. This privileges community as the place for articulating processes of development and research. Also, it reinforces the importance of managing research connecting schools with their local communities.

The research process: design, data recording and data analysis procedures

The overall study was designed to follow the previous assumptions, based on requirements of participative and inclusive research (Allan & Slee, 2008), which attempts to develop research initiatives using democratic and collaborative research approaches (Hansen, Ramstad, Richter, Smith & Stratton, 2001; Nind, 2014). Furthermore, the study was particularly focused on researching and improving education from the local and community perspective.

To meet these objectives, a research study, called “Schools on the path to educational inclusion: working with the local community to promote change,” was designed with various levels of participation and stages: intra-school, inter-schools and local.

The study was conducted in all nursery and primary schools in A Estrada (Spain), a town with urban and rural areas, halfway between other important towns and cities in the area. The research started in 2009 in three of the 9 infant and primary local schools. In one year, all the remaining schools were involved in the research. Due to the participative nature of the research, the participation of schools and local institutions in the research was carefully negotiated and ethical aspects of the process were agreed on among the parties concerned. The main requirement in looking for schools was to identify schools willing to improve their capacity to respond inclusively to diversity. Also, it was important that schools were interested in seeking and building new experiences and pathways with other local schools and services in the community. Voluntary participation in the process was also guaranteed.

The sample comprised all the nine state nursery and primary schools in the town. Two were nursery schools (one municipal and the other private); further

two were town-centre state schools combining nursery and primary, while four other such schools were located in the surrounding countryside.

In this study, schools and teachers are the core referents for articulating the process of change. However, as participative action research suggests the voices of the groups which have had a marginal presence in IE research, these have also been incorporated at various stages and levels of study. Thus, in addition to teachers, families and students, educational and social agents (representatives of groups of people in vulnerable conditions, NGOs, social services, media, etc.) were invited to participate in the research process.

Instrument and Procedures

Fieldwork was conducted in the period of 2009–2014. To identify central issues, we undertook a broad series of participative procedures and techniques, all aimed at documenting, understanding and analysing the different processes in which the schools and communities were engaged:

- *individual interviews* with principals, head teachers, class teachers, school project coordinators, and families;
- *recorded audio and/or video* of the fortnightly working meetings of the teaching staff, of the joint activities of the schools network: meetings of teachers from the six schools (three per year); of the Local Commission meetings or the aforementioned activities (Fairs, shows, etc.);
- collection of school documentation: statistical analysis of the schools, educational school plans, educational school curriculum; internal reports, etc.;
- *field notes* with observations and video recordings of new classroom practices,
- *focus groups* of school projects coordinators (one per year); and inter-school focus groups with a sample of students from each school (one per year).
- *memos* and minutes of improvement activities, and
- *documentation* from other qualitative activities and strategies developed in schools, such as official plans or short narratives made by students, families, teachers or other participants.

Participative research data analysis was developed in order to better understand user perspectives. This allowed researchers and other participants to creatively develop their own approaches to understanding participant experiences and narratives, as Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2010) pointed out. In this manner, an important number of documents and activities were analysed by the participants themselves, organized into research groups, such as students analysing a photovoice activity

developed in schools, following the proposals of visual research methods (Holm, 2010; Miles and Howes, 2015) and visual ethnography (Pink, 2007); teachers analysing memos and reports of “good practices”, or groups of teachers and other stakeholders analysing the content of short family reports about school transitions. Data analysis of audio-registered information was thematically analysed by the research team to identify common and contradictory themes through an iterative process of reflection and discussion, following the principles of document analysis (Flick, 2009) and content analysis (Bardin, 1977). These themes provided the framework for a coding structure for a second thematic analysis, which was organised using MaxQDA, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis program.

Research results: The participatory process: mapping collaborative inquiries into inclusion

As already discussed, a model combining features of participatory research and community research was developed in all the nine schools. This model included three different levels of work: level A: Intra-school collaborative inquiry; level B: Inter-school collaborative inquiry; and level C: Local collaborative inquiry.

At level A (Intra-school Collaborative Inquiry), following the model of learning communities, a teaching team in each school worked on the design and development of a collaborative research and improvement plan that would improve inclusion in school. At this point, the school participants, together with two members of the university research team in each school, established a participatory process through fortnightly working meetings. The role of researchers was to facilitate, by working with teachers, the necessary conditions for the research and change project, designed to support improvements in the school (Parrilla, Muñoz-Cadavid y Sierra, 2013).

At this level, each school articulated what is called inside schools a “school collaborative inquiry”: a whiting school analysis, design and development of pathways to reach inclusion, based on a selection of internal areas/topics on which improvement will be focused. Each institution working in teams followed a work cycle inspired by the participatory methodologies (McTaggart, 1994), which help participants to achieve the objectives identified by the group.

The cycle followed in each school, included the following stages: needs analysis; data collection; data analysis; prioritization and planning for improvement; development; monitoring progress; and finally, review and revision. But this is not a step-by-step proposal, but rather an approach to research that is used in many

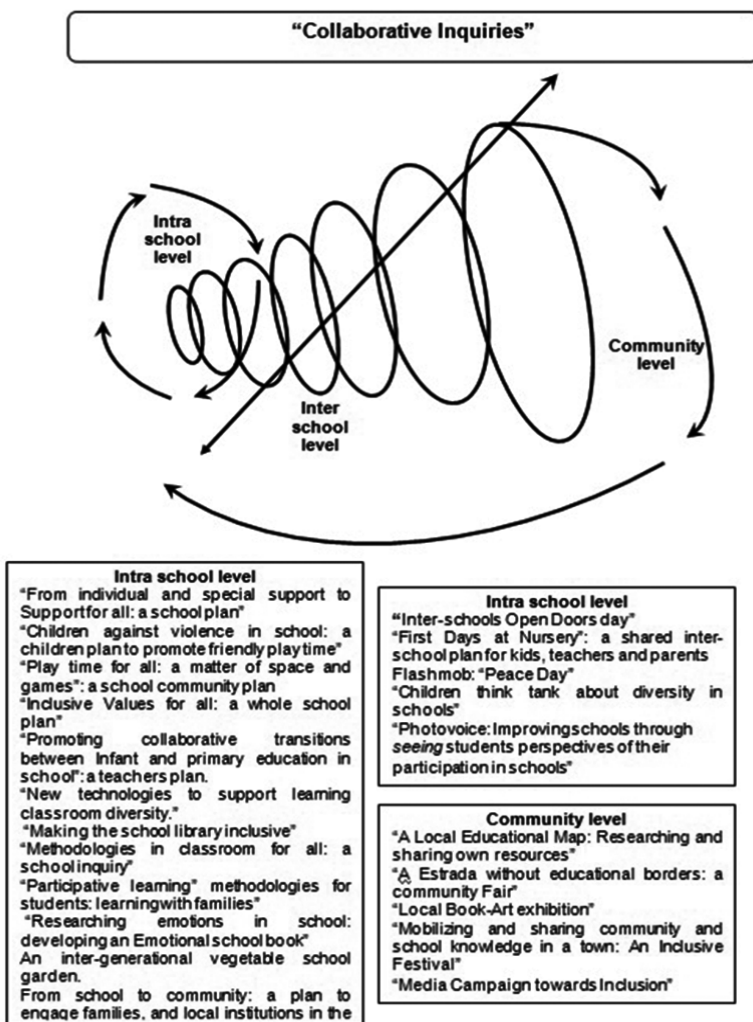


Figure 1. Synopsis of collaborative inquiries and plans at different levels: inside schools, inter-schools and community (elaborated by the authors)

different ways by participants in the same school, and between schools, adapting the stages in each case to the situation. Although it was common to develop a cycle each academic year per school, there were some schools that developed more than one cycle per year (working in successive topics in the same year).

In doing so, the schools found many different, innovative ways to respond to their commitment to inclusion, depending on the context and needs. Table 1 shows the collaborative inquiries developed in the nine schools throughout the research process.

Within schools it is possible to identify different ways to face inclusion, whether the primary focus is on change in a particular area of interest in the school, or on the school as a whole. For example, at a classroom level, a school collaborative inquiry developed in at least 4 schools was focused on "*Methodologies for all*". This consists of the analysis, design, development and assessment of new learning activities that encourage teachers to think about all students when they design and develop teaching in their classrooms. Another example, in this case of a collaborative inquiry focused on the institution as a whole was named "*Inclusive values for all. A whole school plan*". In this case the collaborative inquiry developed within school assumed the participation of teachers, parents and students designing and developing interdisciplinary activities to promote inclusive values.

The diverse and innovative collaborative enquiries developed in each school involved changes in daily practice and behaviour; they contributed to the strengthening of ties between the teachers, and they created new relationships between the members of the school community. The participants considered all these changes as inclusive, not only in their objectives, but also in their procedure and development.

Level B (Inter-school collaborative inquiry) involved the creation of an inter-school network around a workgroup and committees made up of members of the nine schools, which analyse and develop actions to improve and respond to the mutual inter-school needs. The nine schools discussed and reached common "inter-school collaborative inquiries" that, as at the intra-school level, followed a work cycle inspired by the participatory methodologies. The school network was based on quarterly meetings of the schools to enable the teams of teachers and students from the schools to analyse, design, develop and review their common proposals and solutions to common needs.

The development of the nine schools network varied over the years, both in its breadth, and in the depth of collaboration established among the schools. Creating a shared inter-school identity can be reported as one of the main results of the schools network. But, establishing collaboration and common values takes time, as

different stakeholders join the process of change, and the network, with different aims, ideas and values about the shared goal of inclusion. The collaborative inter-school inquiries developed in the network usually amounted to no more than two each year. The most common inter-school collaborative inquiries were linked to the critical exchange of ideas and inclusive practices among the colleagues. Members of the school community reported that these activities offered important gains in personal confidence, professional development and motivation. Nevertheless, more complex activities, such as new practices involving teachers, students, and agencies, were more difficult to achieve. An inter-school student activity using a photo-voice methodology (Doval, Martínez-Figueira, Raposo, 2013), a FlashMob networked activity, a think tank of students to promote active answers to diversity in schools, or an inter-school proposal to make inclusive educational transitions could be cited as examples that contributed to facilitating inter-school participation, allowing schools to embrace new and imaginative channels of collaboration.

Level C (Local collaborative inquiry) involved the creation of a *Local Inclusive Education Network*, including the local community and some socio-educational institutions (local council, Ministry of Education, Social Services) to set directions, analyse and inclusively act at the local level. Following the same process described in previous phases, local collaborative inquiries were developed between the university, schools, the local council and diverse local organisations and associations to amplify and promote inclusion in the social field.

The local collaborative inquiries developed included a reduced number of inquiries in contrast to inter-school or intra-school inquiries. This is due to the complexity of the processes that include a broad number of agents. School Shows in local halls exhibitions, Education Fairs, Inclusive Media Campaigns or an Inclusive Educational Festival were just some of the local inquiries developed to promote inclusion beyond the school walls.

The level of implication of local educational institutions in the collaborative inquiry, the commitment of the participants, and the presence of distributed leadership between the members were determinants at the third level of the study. As well as at the inter-school level, collaboration between schools and agencies was a powerful stage for innovative thinking and practice.

Conclusions and Reflections

The study invites us to reconsider IE, paying special attention to its conceptualization as a process that places the community and the school community

relations in their core. In so doing, a new role for schools in communities, a new relational framework, as well as the establishment of relations with local agencies is required to carry out IE plans that scale their scope from the limits of the school towards the community.

As other studies pointed out (Ainscow & West, 2006), IE provides an opportunity to challenge commonplace practices within and beyond the institutional context, inviting us to improve them, indicating new settings for this change. The thematic analysis of collaborative inquiries developed in this study, at the intra-school, inter-schools or community levels, establishes different and new pathways through which expertise and lessons from innovations could be extended. In such a manner, our study offers specific lessons about innovative ways to face inclusion such as: support for individual students' needs in schools; management of social and affective issues; development of methodologies for all in classrooms; building of a shared identity and understanding between schools, the community and citizenship engagement in inclusive actions, or the way to translate, and disseminate the knowledge into the social arena. These proposals differed in scope and treatment in each context, but were developed using shared processes based on collaborative strategies (collaboration with colleagues, professional dialogue, listening to students' voices, learning conversations, micro-collaborative inquiries with external educational agents, etc.). In general, these processes coincide with previous research in the idea that working together is a key tool for IE. As Ainscow (2015) has recently argued, a theoretical interpretation of this is the fact that the collaborative work of different agents strengthens the social capital in a specific context, and subsequently, its capacities and possibilities.

This study also suggests that connecting community-based and participatory action research to design and analyse IE provides a framework that responds to the challenges and needs that IE requires at different levels (intra-school, inter-school, and local). Our study is clear in confirming the value of different ways of learning together to develop inclusion, but this does not mean that we have solutions to transfer to any place. On the contrary, the study suggests that IE requires a different kind of collaboration and particular development in any context if we seek to develop approaches relevant to a particular situation.

By way of an example of participatory and community research, this study has some limitations that need to be taken into account in further research. The most important one is that this is a small-scale study. Also, we do not report in this paper, due to the word limit, the in-depth analysis of collaborative processes developed in the research (cf., Parrilla, Muñoz & Sierra, 2013, to a full-scale analysis of the research process). Nevertheless, the evidence provides clear pointers to the

potential of both approaches to be used as a useful lens for a systematic manner of improving and researching IE in a way that is sensitive to the complex and interactive nature of the inclusive processes.

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