

“Facing the Challenges of Inclusive Education”

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The 1983 **World Program of Action Concerning Disabled Persons** states under Article 120 that all Member States agree that education for persons with disabilities should be carried out, as far as possible, within the general school system. A few years later, the 1989 **Convention on the Rights of the Child** acknowledged the special needs of children with disabilities, and stated that these children must be guaranteed “effective access to education in a manner conducive to the child achieving the fullest possible social integration and individual development...”

Such notion was further asserted by the 1990 **World Declaration on Education for All**, by the 1993 **Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities**, and by the 1994 **UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action**.

In Latin America, with the purpose of giving continuity to the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action, UNESCO started organizing in 1996 several meetings in different countries to discuss the issue “Perspectives of Special Education in Latin American and Caribbean countries.” They came to the conclusion that the integration of students with special educational needs within the regular school system is everybody’s responsibility, and that such responsibility must be assumed by the different technical and administrative authorities of the Ministry of Education.

These actions were followed by the 2000 **Dakar Framework for Action**, which set 6 goals that were considered essential and reachable. It was announced that, at the latest by 2015, all primary school-age children would receive free education of an acceptable quality and that, by the same year, schooling disparities between girls and boys would be eliminated.

These statements, conventions, and other international and regional documents could lead us to believe that the process is well on its way, and that scheduled deadlines are being met. Unfortunately, we have to emphatically deny such idea. A UNESCO 2002 assessment concluded that the world is on the wrong track if we expect to meet the goals proposed in Dakar, because we are neither making the

necessary efforts, nor showing the necessary interest. Moreover, the Director-General of UNESCO said in October, 2003 that 98% of children with disabilities in developing countries are not attending school.

In spite of the data, we must admit that the situation in Latin America is somewhat better than in other regions of the world. The actions taken by UNESCO and several INGOs working in the area encouraged the Governments of the different countries to “face” the issue, and consequently we have seen some progress. But we are still far from reaching the six goals proposed in Dakar; we are not even meeting the Millennium Goals:

1. Achieving universal primary education
2. Promoting gender equality and female autonomy

Considering this situation, we wonder what strategies we should implement to turn into facts these international and regional resolutions and statements that appeared in the past few years.

1) Start early

Article 5 of the **World Declaration on Education for All** adopted during the 1990 Conference on Education for All announces: “Learning begins at birth.” Nobody denies such indisputable truth, but... are we respecting it?

Few countries in Latin America have included schooling for 0 to 3 year old children into their educational system. In general, in this region as in the rest of the world, there is not much focus on children of this age. There are not enough detection and medical/eye examination programs. No referrals are made to specialized centres, because such centres do not exist or, if they do, they do not have specialized staff.

This situation is further complicated by the fact that most of the people identified as having a visual impairment, actually have low vision. The difference between blindness and low vision is relatively new because for years these children were treated as being blind, thus disregarding their remaining vision.

It is true that in some countries children with low vision are starting to be served in a coordinated manner, like having health and education services working jointly. There are even educational policies including children with low vision in the regular school system. But the truth is that most countries clearly show a lack of qualified doctors and teachers to treat low vision. The lack of official policies in the area further complicates the situation because little is known about low vision.

Considering the scarce attention paid to babies with visual impairment, (blindness or even less low vision), and in our role as specialized teachers, can we change this reality?

The answer is “yes”, and for that purpose, we should direct our actions towards:

- Fulfilling our role as specialists in the subject, and becoming a tool that can modify governments' attitudes and our surroundings. We have to advocate for governments to include this first stage in the life of a child in their policies, and for the needs of this group to be met.
- Working co-ordinately with health services to favour early detection of blind children and children with low vision, and guaranteeing they receive adequate eye examinations and immediate referral to specialized centres of Early Intervention.
- Supporting the development of services within existing centres, or of home programs whose staff know how to address the issues related to a baby's blindness or low vision. Staffs should be able to adapt their approach depending on the person's remaining vision.
- Involving family members in the care of a child with visual impairment. To do this, we must provide all the information they request, set up advising centres, and support the family throughout the education process of the child.

2) Provide answers to the demands of children/youth with visual impairment.

Rule number 6 of the 1993 United Nations **Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities** states that accessibility to education in integrated settings, and support services designed to meet the needs of children/youth with disabilities should be provided.

This article presents two points that cannot be overlooked: Increasing **the number of students** attending regular schools, and improving the **quality of education**.

What can we say about these points?

According to estimates from international organizations, it is calculated that the number of children and young people who have access to education in the Latin American region is less than 15%. This number has increased recently. According to UNESCO, this figure has never been as high; although we must unfortunately point out that there is a considerable dropout rate from the fifth grade on, or even before that.

We must also add that after the recent actions taken by many Governments to favour inclusive education, **access** to education *has* improved, but what can we say about **quality**? Are the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities followed? Unfortunately the answer is "no."

We often find children/youth with visual impairment attending regular schools, but in a passive manner. They are left on their own to fend for themselves, or they depend on what regular teachers and their parents can do to help them. There are no qualified teachers that can provide advising and support during the process, and no educational material that would allow these children to have an active role. We can

conclude then that they are *physically* integrated; in some cases, they are *functionally* and *socially* integrated. But there is no *attitudinal* integration, and it is only at this point that we can truly achieve “full participation and equality” (United Nations slogan).

What causes this situation? There is a lot of confusion, especially at the policymaking level, in connection with the concept of “inclusive education” and the means to accomplish such inclusion. Many education authorities believe that preparing bibliographic material on “Serving Diversity”, and organizing awareness and training events for regular teachers is enough to successfully accomplish inclusive education.

We must say that such thinking is wrong.

Training regular teachers is very important. It is actually one of the foundations that can lead us to make inclusive education a successful reality.

Qualified teachers know that classroom needs must be approached “**from a curricular standpoint**”, in which difficulties are defined depending on each specific task and activity, and on classroom conditions. The types of curricula they develop are **process-based**, therefore they are flexible and they adjust to the unique diversity of each group. They are not based on learning goals that resort exclusively to testing to measure how much a child has learnt. Qualified teachers know that sometimes they need to **modify** materials, techniques, methods, etc.; that when necessary, they have to **replace** or **skip** activities, that they might have to **adjust scheduled times**, etc.

Therefore we can assert that advanced professional training for primary school teachers is extremely important, and represent one of three essential foundations. But, what about the other two foundations?

The second one is having an **external support service** to address the “barriers to learning and participation” that students with disabilities face in regular classrooms. This external support must be provided by an expert team (qualified staff) who needs to work at the regular school jointly with children, teachers, other services, parents and education community as a whole. As stated in the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education: “Children with special educational needs should receive additional instructional support in the context of the regular curriculum.” The same document continues:

“The guiding principle should be to provide all children with the same education, providing additional assistance and support to children requiring it.”

We often see in countries with no **external support services** that, as integrated/inclusive education moves forward and more children with visual impairment attend regular schools, the weaknesses of classes like Arithmetic,

Geometry, Physics, Chemistry, and mainly of classes related to personal independence like Orientation and Mobility, and Activities of Daily Living, become more apparent. In general, parents and teachers give more importance to school curriculum while plus curricular activities, which allow children/youth with visual impairment to achieve their personal independence, are regarded as less important.

The situation is even worse when we talk about **students with low vision** because there are very few services that include specialized doctors and teachers, and technical resources to meet the special needs of these groups. Moreover, low vision devices are generally expensive, so acquiring them can be difficult.

In this specific situation, these children should have access to:

- Eye examinations, prescriptions of optical devices and trainings on how to use them, and subsequent referral to education centres.
- Clear and explanatory diagnoses that specify what, how and how much the child/youth with low vision can see, which teachers can use as a guideline for their work.
- Low vision specialists that help to adjust the educational approach to what the student's remaining vision requires.

Finally, the third foundation is the **teaching-learning material**. Having reading and writing material in Braille is essential: writing frames, styluses, Braille typewriters when possible; reading and studying material; abacuses, geometrical figures, maps, sketches, models, etc.

Unfortunately, the reality in the region is that students with visual impairment do not have access to the material they need. Many of them get good grades, but they can only participate orally. Can we say then that they have equal opportunities?

We often hear people raising their voices against Inclusive Education on the grounds that it does not achieve its goals. We must accept that some results are not fully satisfactory, but we cannot infer from that fact that Inclusive Education is a failure.

Good inclusive practices relate to training regular teachers, working co-ordinately with support teams, and using the teaching material that better adapts to each child with visual impairment.

In general, the experts' support and the teaching material necessary to create equal conditions for children with visual impairment are provided by the staff of traditional Special Education Schools that under the new approach have become **Resource Centres**. Frequently, when Governments do not offer professional training to regular teachers, these Resource Centres take on that responsibility. Also, many centres have adequate printing technology.

Actions Taken by INGOs

CBM and ICEVI are working in all the countries of the region to improve **access** to and **quality** in inclusive schools. With such goals in mind, they are taking the following actions:

- They cooperate with Governments, other INGOs, and local organizations to develop public educational and awareness campaigns aiming at ensuring that visual impairment becomes “visible” and socially acceptable. These campaigns promote early detection for those who need special services, while they also advocate for these issues to be included in official policies to make people with visual impairment “visible” to the law, and to achieve equal access and full participation.
- They encourage networking between education and health services, so that people with visual impairment can receive appropriate medical care, and can be referred to services that could improve their quality of life, the use of their remaining vision, and their education and employment opportunities.
- They offer training programmes to teams of specialists on low vision, improving in this way the quality of existing services, and favouring the creation of new services where there are none.
- They develop the skills of special education and regular teachers, parents and members of the community by organizing courses, congresses and conferences on subjects such as: Early Intervention, Inclusive Education, Orientation and Mobility, Activities of Daily Living, Technology, etc. In addition, they promote the creation of university-level degrees for the comprehensive training of special education teachers who will support inclusive education.
- They provide teaching material to encourage the participation of children/youth with disabilities in the teaching-learning process in conditions comparable to those of their sighted peers.

An experience supported by CBM and ICEVI in the Dominican Republic

The National School for the Blind, depending on the Secretary of State for Education and Culture of the Dominican Republic, was founded on April 22, 1957 as a boarding school. As the only school in its category, it provided education for all Dominican children until it became a National Centre of Educational Resources on Visual Impairment in May 2002. Since then, it has been performing the following functions:

- a) It works co-ordinately with the education departments of each province for the purpose of advising authorities on the implementation of inclusive education.
- b) It trains regular teachers throughout the country to serve pre-school and school-age children with visual impairment.
- c) It offers advanced training to specialists so that they can advise regular school teachers, and serve 0 to 3 year old children.

- d) It offers support, guidance and advising for the education of children and youth with visual impairment in public and private centres throughout the country.
- e) It involves family members in the education process of these children and youth.
- f) It provides education to children and youth with multiple disabilities or deafblindness.

We can see that a country with scarce economic resources, and with no university-level degrees to favour professional training, has been able to implement inclusive education at the national level. Such process involves the participation of education authorities, teachers, parents and community members.

Consequently, the number of children with visual impairment who receive education through their community schools is increasing, and the quality of the education delivered is improving as well.

We would like to finish by saying that, even though we still have a long way to go, Inclusive Education *is* POSSIBLE.

When all participants, Governments, NGOs, teachers, students, parents and communities take action and join their efforts, the goal of achieving equality of access and opportunities for children/youth with visual impairment can start to become a reality.