Contribution: **"Inclusive schools as an urban education strategy"**

P. Arnaiz; R. de Haro; R. Martínez; A.Escarbajal.

University of Murcia (Spain)

E-mail: parnaiz@um.es

Introduction

The main challenge facing education systems today is to promote a democratic and inclusive education and to ensure the right of all children and youth to receive quality education based on the principles of equality, equity and social justice. Thus, educational institutions should promote the necessary processes to ensure inclusion. In this paper we present the project "Improvement Plans: Moving toward an Inclusive School"[1] carried out in the Autonomous Region of Murcia (Spain), jointly coordinated by the Ministry of Education, Training and Employment and the Research Team of the University of Murcia (Spain): "Inclusive Education: School for All" led by Dr. Pilar Arnaiz. Its main objective is to implement improvement plans taking the development of inclusive education as a reference model (Ainscow, 2001; Arnaiz, 2011; Arnaiz, Haro, Escarbajal, 2010, Booth & Ainscow, 2002, Fullan, 2001). The objectives of the project relate to:

- Learning and developing policies, practices and inclusive cultures in schools participating in the Improvement Plans Project.

- Understanding, implementing and evaluating different strategies, techniques and methodologies that promote attention to diversity in the classroom.

- Learning techniques and skills to develop teaching and learning processes based on collaborative-cooperative work.

- Encouraging participation of parents and pupils in school life.

- Establishing support and collaboration networks among members and institutions.

- And learning about schools´ experiences on the functioning of a classroom based on diversification of the instructional process, as well as implementing and assessing these experiences.

This project emerges within the theory-practice movement for improving school effectiveness, which focuses on implementing change processes to achieve improvement in schools. Indeed, the development process was inspired by the steps to improve a school bearing in mind the philosophy of effective schools (Davis & Thomas, 1992; Ramasut & Reynolds, 1997), which are: consolidation of the work team, diagnosis of the situation, analysis and problem formulation; search for solutions; development of an action plan, preparation of implementation and collaborative development of the action plan, as well as the assessment of the experience. This work plan was carried out in seven schools, five were Nursery and Primary Education schools and two were Secondary Education schools.

In the following pages we will give details of the methodological design of this project, as well as the different stages. A project example of a school will be given at the end of this paper.

2. Project features: Design and stages

As mentioned in the previous section, the general aim of this project is to promote reflection-action processes among participating schools, especially inclusion-exclusion processes which are present in schools, so that improvement plans that lead to educational improvement may be implemented.

The method we used was determined by the characteristics of the project. Bearing in mind the fact that our research deals with educational practices in the nursery, primary and secondary classrooms, we started analysing the reality of each school and then develop an improvement plan. The model that best meets the objectives and features of this study is "action research".

In this respect, Elliott (1990) points out that this kind of studies are an ideal tool for teachers' professional development, as it requires a process of cooperative reflection, puts into practice the joint analysis of means and ends, and suggests the transformation of reality through analysis and stakeholder involvement in the design, development and evaluation of change strategies. Also Kemmis and Taggart (1992) define action research as participatory and collaborative research, arising from the clarification of concerns generally shared in a group.

This is a descriptive and interpretative research study in the first place, as it seeks to analyze and realize the reality of each school so that we can later establish and implement improvement proposals. Similarly, it is an assessment study, as it aims to measure each school's progress toward inclusion, i.e., regarding the presence, participation and success of all students. Below we give details of the stages of our project.

2.1. Project and stages

The project "Improvement Plans: Moving toward an Inclusive School" was developed in three stages. At this moment we are in the third stage, which focuses on the assessment of the improvement plans developed in each of the schools.

2.1.1. Planning stage

a) Selection of schools

The selection of schools was carried out taking into account the following criteria:

- Schools would be Nursery and Primary Education schools as well as Compulsory Secondary Education schools. They would not be too large and it would be difficult to teach-learn given the characteristics of their environments.
- Most of teachers would be engaged in the project.
- Schools would have as an objective to develop inclusive education.

Once the criteria were determined, we listed a number of schools that met our criteria. The first contact was made via telephone conversation with the school principals. We scheduled a first visit to inform the management teams about the project features, objectives, development, documentation, etc. They were given some time to introduce the project to other teachers, making clear that we would be willing to visit them on another occasion to discuss the project in more depth.

The project was approved in staff meetings in selected schools and the minutes of the meeting taken. The composition of the schools was as follows:

- Nursery and Primary Education Schools (CEIP, hereafter):
CEIP Stella Maris (Cartagena)
CEIP Anibal (Cartagena)
CEIP Nuestra Señora del Paso (La Ñora)
CEIP Nuestra Señora del Rosario (Alhama de Murcia)
CEIP Barriomar 74 (Murcia)

- Secondary Education Schools (IES, hereafter)
IES Luis Manzanares (Torre Pacheco)
IES Gerardo Molina (Torre Pacheco)

School participation and involvement was high. Only one of them, CEIP Barriomar 74, had a lower level of participation as there were significant differences between the interest to participate and the materialization of this interest in actual actions. After our meetings we noticed this school's preference for training processes linked to models of technical rationality.

b) Organizational structure

Once the schools were chosen, we defined the organizational dynamics that would define the project design, implementation and evaluation. To this end, we identified two clearly distinct but complementary types of structures, namely: school structure and school external structure. Let us explain each in turn.

❑ *School structure*

Schools were made up of all the teachers from a single school or college participating in the project. Within a school structure there was a "*School Internal*

Team" made up of a Principal, an Assistant Principal and Year Coordinators. The basic function of this committee was to streamline the project in the school.

❑ *School external structure*

The external structure was made up of the "*Planning Team*" which was made up of: Educational Administration (two representatives of the Ministry of Education, Training and Employment of the Region of Murcia, Spain), the internal team of each school, the Project Director and two members of Research Team of the University of Murcia, Spain.

The committee met three times per year in order to assess how the project was being developed and to take the necessary decisions for its proper functioning. It is worth noting the objectives set by this committee: a) to determine the interest and participation of schools, b) to encourage the implementation of new methods and changes in the classroom, c) to seek inclusive practices that involve improved educational quality and d) to provide support and assistance necessary to enable the compliance with the proposed objectives.

c) Training dynamics

Training times were mixed. First, there was school training to cater for the needs and characteristics of each environment. Second, general training was aimed at all participants in the project in the form of lectures, presentations, which took place after discussion sessions. Thirdly, there were open days to facilitate knowledge and exchange of experiences among participating schools.

These training activities were conducted at two levels.

❑ *Training in a large group*: Training was given to all the participants in this project and took place outside school hours through lectures and presentations of people with a proven career in the topics chosen by the schools, as well as through conferences to disseminate their experiences. There were two group training sessions each academic year with a duration of four hours each. There were also two open days to inform about the work done.

❑ *Team training*: Only teachers of each school attended this team training, so it was training in small groups, in greater depth and focused on giving an answer to the needs and concerns arising in each school or college. Team training was carried out outside school hours, and we enabled the presence of internal teams from other schools at these meetings so that they would act as a network for dissemination of the knowledge shared in these training sessions.

❑ *Visits by the project monitoring team*: We performed at least 4-6 visits per year to each school during the hours teachers spent working on the project, so that we could encourage and assist them should they need some advice.

2.2.2. Implementation stage

The first step in implementing our project after the consolidation of different work team is to diagnose the reality of each school. Understanding this reality is the first step to initiate a process of improvement. We therefore need to analyze the school culture, policies and practices, as these may become walls that prevent and hinder the promotion of inclusive education.

We had to undertake a self-assessment of the school in order to identify barriers to learning and participation which hampered the development of education for all. As Alvarez (2006) suggested, self-assessment carried out in schools makes them more aware of their reality by providing the information necessary to identify those areas for improvement through systematic, effective and dynamic actions. Thus, assessment becomes a key element for improvement, and the information generated through assessment may be used for making decisions and defining improvement plans.

Some schools used materials developed by teacher Booth & Ainscow (2002), "Index for Inclusion" so that they could carry out the self-assessment process. These materials are rich tools to analyze life in schools, assess the situation with regard to inclusive education and analyze and make decisions about which aspects should be improved, thus establishing action proposals.

After identifying the school's barriers and strengths to achieve an inclusive education, we analyzed, identified and prioritized the needs for change in order to establish an action plan, such as improvement plans.

The improvement plans we implemented had different characteristics according to the different features of schools, yet they all aimed at promoting inclusive practices. Thus, on some occasions in the improvement plans that had been carried out we found new ways of organizing and grouping students, as well as new teaching methods, review of established curriculum proposals or new proposals in order to develop education without exclusion. A key factor to achieve this aim was team work and external advice and training, which provided support to schools so they could initiate processes of change towards more inclusive approaches. These changes were led by a group strongly committed to change and are now part of the educational projects as part of the schools´ mission.

The projects represent the institution's desire to improve. The proposed changes emerge from collective deliberation and the institution's commitment. As Gairín (2009, 23) suggests, these are "a real commitment to the democratization of education, as they explain the training intentions and extend the benefits of a proposal to all students. From this perspective, it makes sense to speak of personal involvement and collective enthusiasm, of the school as basic unit of change or of the challenge of innovation as a reference for a more comprehensive change."

2.2.3 Assessment stage

At present we find ourselves in this stage. We are following up on improvement plans made in each of the schools and assessing them.

3. The project in one of the schools

As mentioned earlier, the project was carried out in seven schools. In the following section we present the development of the project in one of the schools, namely CEIP Nuestra Señora del Rosario, located in Alhama de Murcia, Murcia (Spain).
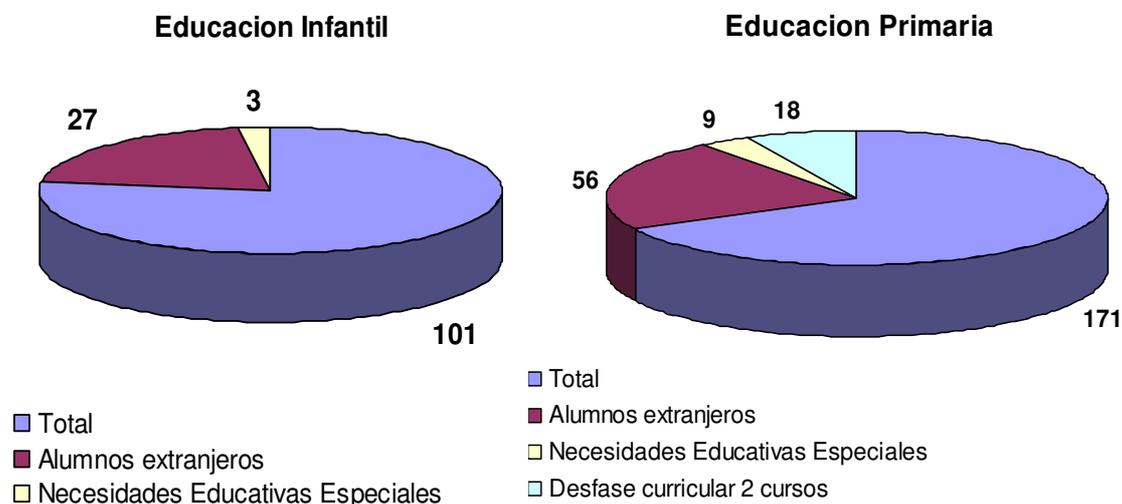
3.1. School context

This school is located in a peripheral area of Alhama de Murcia, Spain, until recently regarded as one of the most disadvantaged areas of the town. Currently, the district is expanding, and in recent years a large number of houses occupied by new

families have been built near the school, which has brought a positive change in the school environment. However, there is still an important group of social housing in the neighbourhood occupied mostly by families with limited resources and a relatively low socioeconomic status. This school has five Nursery Education units (101 students enrolled) and nine Primary Education units (171 students enrolled). There are 22 teachers and a counsellor of the Sector Psychopedagogical Team and a Social Worker of that very same team. The following table shows the specialisation subjects of the teachers of the school.

Specialisation subjects of the teachers	Number
Primary Education	6
Nursery Education	6
Music	1
English language	2
French language	1
Physical Education	2
Therapeutical Pedagogy	2
Compensatory Education	2[2]
Total	22

Of a total of 272 students enrolled in this school, there are 27 foreign students and 3 students with special educational needs in Nursery Education. In Primary Education there are 56 foreign students, 9 students with special educational needs, and 18 students with an achievement gap of two years, who are supported by compensatory education teachers.

Educacion Infantil

Educacion Primaria

- Total
- Alumnos extranjeros
- Necesidades Educativas Especiales

- Total
- Alumnos extranjeros
- Necesidades Educativas Especiales
- Desfase curricular 2 cursos

GRAPHS:
Nursery Education
Total
Foreign students
Special Educational Needs

---

[2] In the school there are two Compensatory Education teachers, one on a full-time basis and the other on a part-time basis working simultaneously in another school.

Primary Education
Total
Foreign students
Special Educational Needs
Achievement gap of 2 years

The sociocultural and economic level of students´ families is often low. Parents show low interest in the education of their children, and their participation in the school is virtually non-existent, especially those who are immigrants. Worth noting is the lack of educational resources students have at hand outside the school; many claim not to have, for instance, a single book at home.

3.2. Project objectives

School teachers strongly believed that change was necessary to give an appropriate educational response to the great diversity of students in their classrooms and to achieve greater involvement of families in the educational process and encourage their participation in school life. After learning about the project features and requirements, and with this aim in mind, the school decided to back the project and establish the same objectives:

- To develop critical thinking that allows them to identify the different forms of exclusion and discrimination that exist in schools.
- To generate decision-making processes on curriculum, organizational and methodological issues aimed at promoting inclusive education.
- To train teachers from the standpoint of inclusive education.
- To make existing resources profitable and provide the school with the resources it may require.
- To foster parents´ involvement in educating their children and in school life.
- To introduce the use of ICTs in the teaching programme, particularly interactive whiteboards.
- To give answers to specific school problems (absenteeism, food, hygiene, ...).

3.3. Process

Following its interest in achieving the objectives set out above, the school decided to start the process. We would like to highlight teacher participation in the project, as 87% of the workforce was involved. The counsellor and social worker of the Educational and Psychopedagogical Counselling Team of the area were also involved. Similarly, parents are represented by a mother representing the Parents´ Association (AMPA in Spanish).

The project started off in the academic year 2008/09. We decided to work from an action-research perspective, and collaborative thinking became the key element for improvement. There was a high level of teacher involvement and participation. The process was developed in three phases:

- Stage I (academic year 2008/09): Sensitization and awareness raising of the need to develop an inclusive school, meanings and implications for educational practice. This stage entailed:

- Reading of articles and materials related to the theoretical framework of Inclusive Education.
- Training with the rest of schools and attendance to conferences and seminars on topics related to the subject of study.
- Introduction and understanding of the "Index for Inclusion" as a likely working tool to be used in the analysis/diagnosis phase.
- Debate and agreement on the project.

This stage allowed us to define and clarify existing beliefs and the wish to develop an inclusive education so that the challenges of the 21st century may be met.

- Stage II (academic year 2009/10): Analysis of the reality of the school. We used the working materials suggested by Booth & Ainscow (2002), namely "Index for Inclusion", so that we would identify school barriers and aids that hinder student learning. As a result, we developed a questionnaire with the aim to learn about the positioning of teachers regarding current educational culture, policies and practices that support or hamper inclusion. After the completion of the questionnaire, results were analyzed and made available so that we could reflect on the areas that required improvement. This task was of great interest as it enabled dialogue, debate and joint discussion about those aspects that determined school life (barriers), but also about school options (strengths). Consequently, the school considered introducing changes and setting up an Improvement Plan.

- Stage III (academic year 2010/11): Implementation and assessment of the Improvement Plan. After understanding the reality of the school and discussing which areas should be improved, we defined an improvement plan. This plan seemed to be linked to the project objectives and was the results of the self-assessment process. The school designed and implemented an improvement plan focused on developing plans to govern school life (coexistence programme and induction programme), introducing changes in the proposed curriculum and including new resources such as the use of interactive whiteboard (IWB hereafter) at all educational levels.

3.3. Results

In the following section we introduce briefly the results we obtained in the analysis stage as well as in the stage devoted to defining and developing the Improvement Plan.

- Stage I: Sensitization and awareness raising

This phase involved participation in internal training sessions developed within the school as well as group sessions in order to find out about the true meanings and implications of promoting inclusive education. Training allowed clarification of ideas and beliefs of participants in the project and sharing of a common framework for action.

- Stage II: Analysis of the reality of the school and design of the Improvement Plan

The use of the "Index for Inclusion" allowed identifying existing barriers to student learning and participation from the standpoint of action in the inclusive school. It allowed introspection into the educational culture, policies

and practices of the school. Without the use of these materials, it would have surely been difficult to become aware of the reality of the school and therefore reflect and decide on areas for improvement. Undoubtedly, the use of these materials allowed the display of ideas, behaviours, and perceptions that were sensed but that no one would directly mention or discuss. Both school strengths and weaknesses or barriers were made obvious. Below we present an overview of these:

INCLUSIVE CULTURES	
STRENGTHS	BARRIERS
Respect for differences. Coordination.	Lack of an Inclusive School Project. Lack of a collaborative work culture. Diversity viewed as a problem. Not using methodologies that promote attention to diversity. Lack of students´ critical engagement against racist attitudes, etc. Representation of all groups.

INCLUSIVE POLICIES	
STRENGTHS	BARRIERS
Shared need to share a training process linked to Inclusive Education. Teacher stability. Desire to analyse and reflect on school life. Positive attitude towards having external support. Support seen as the responsibility of all teachers.	Lack of strategies and resources to pay attention to student diversity. Lack of time and room to develop collaborative work. Lack of coordination with external support agents. Barriers/accessibility to school. Lack of induction programmes. Lack of commitment/share responsibility when facing students´ needs.

INCLUSIVE PRACTICES	
STRENGTHS	BARRIERS
Support is seen as a mechanism to promote development and improvement. Unbiased distribution of resources. Promoting the school library as a resource. Design and development of activities to foster parental involvement.	Adaptation and contextualization of the curriculum. Materials do not reflect students´ backgrounds and experiences. Lack of cooperation from organizations/organisms in the neighbourhood. Lack of sharing experiences with other schools.

- Stage III: Implementation and assessment of the Improvement Plan.

Those needs that were identified helped us define an improvement plan. In this respect, we would like to emphasise the fact that changes should be introduced gradually. Thus, the school decided to:

- Develop an Induction Programme.
- Develop a Coexistence Programme.
- Produce integrated didactic units for the second part of Nursery and Primary Education.
- Introduce Interactive Whiteboards (IWB) in teaching programmes.
- Introduce methodologies that promote attention to diversity such as cooperative learning.

Thus, the objectives that were initially set were finally accomplished because:

- Critical thinking was developed to identify those barriers to learning and participation of all students.
- Changes related to the needs of the school were promoted in school life. These changes brought about the development of an Induction Programme aimed at teachers, students and families that arrive for first time at the school. Also, a Coexistence Programme was developed with the aim to eradicate racist, sexist and stereotyped attitudes and behaviours towards differences.
- Training processes were developed, which led us to reconsider the existing school curriculum. In this respect, teaching units were integrated with the introduction of methodologies that promote attention to diversity. Similarly, we managed to update training in the use of IWB and designed some activities to introduce them in various teaching units. Students started using interactive whiteboards to access the curriculum and to develop some basic skills, and to a greater degree, language skills, learning how to learn and developing personal autonomy. On various occasions cooperative learning methodologies came into use.
- Activities were designed to foster parental involvement in school life, and to promote the organization of a conference and the invitation to participate in different activities.
- Finally, we set up committees to study and address the various problems related to food, hygiene and isolated cases of truancy that persist in the school.

Everybody continues working in the school in a collaborative manner in order to promote inclusive practices in the classroom. The experiences mentioned above are now widespread at all levels. Participants rate this experience very positively, as put in their own words:

"It has been a positive experience. We had to make an effort but some room for reflection on how to change and improve has been created. It was a necessary starting point"

(Session 18, Principal)

"We are on the way to move forward, on the way to tackle specific issues"
                              (Session 18, Teacher 4th year of Primary Education)

"There is a need to continue searching and analyzing why things happen the way they do and how we can transform them"
                              (Session 18, Teacher 5th year of Primary Education)

4. Conclusions

After presenting our project "Improvement Plans: Moving toward an Inclusive School", we would like to highlight some thoughts that emerge as a result of the work we have undertaken:

- ✓ Participation and involvement of schools in this project enabled the development of action-research processes within the school.
- ✓ This implied an improvement of educational practice because schools had to analyse their reality and then introduce an improvement plan. The nature of improvements varies, but improvements are always aimed at improving education quality for all students from the action framework of inclusive education.
- ✓ This process generated the development of a collaborative culture because of the importance of reflection-action process jointly developed by participants in this experience. These collaborative processes, if taken as work tools, training and professional support, led to educational change and improvement in almost all schools.
- ✓ The work of schools with other institutions taking part in this research study promoted the development of support networks between schools. Channels of communication and exchange of beliefs and practices were generated, which created a space for coming together, communication, respect and enhancement of participants´ personal and professional careers.
- ✓ The development of cultures and collaborative networks between schools and institutions alike are key players in the promotion and development of inclusive schools. This argument is supported by studies by Sandill Ainscow (2010), Arnaiz et al (2007), Arnaiz et al (2010), Grill et al (2010), Grill and Gallego (2001) and Morin, Gallego and Hernandez (2010), among others.

To finish with, we would like to draw attention to the complexity and time required to promote and consolidate changes that lead to educational improvement and, therefore, the need for support that such changes require from leading institutions, administration and, as in our case, teams outside schools. We regard future follow-up and support process as necessary so that recent changes will remain and schools ensure increasingly better education for all individuals.

References

Ainscow, M. (2001). *Desarrollo de escuelas inclusivas. Ideas, propuestas y experiencias para mejorar las instituciones escolares*. Madrid: Narcea.

Ainscow, M. y Sandill, A. (2010). Developing inclusive education systems: the role of organisational cultures and leadership. En *International Journal of Inclusive Education,* 14 (4), 401-416.

Alvárez, F.J. (2006). Aprender de los resultados de hoy para mejorar la educación del mañana. *Revista de Educación,* número extraordinario, 431-437.

Arnaiz, P. (2011). Luchando contra la exclusión: buenas prácticas y éxito escolar. *Revista Innovación educativa*, 21, 23-29.

Arnaiz, P.; De Haro, R. y Escarbajal, A. (2010). *Planes de mejora en CEIP: Hacia una escuela inclusiva.* En A. Manzanares (Ed). *Organizar y dirigir en la complejidad. Instituciones educativas en evolución* (pp. 291-301). Madrid: Wolters Kluwer.

Arnaiz, P. y otros. (2004-2007). *Escuelas de Calidad para todos y entre todos: indicadores para una atención eficaz a la diversidad del alumnado* (SEJ 2005-01794). Financiado por el Plan Nacional de Investigación Científica, Desarrollo e Innovación Tecnológica (I+D+I).

Booth, T.; Ainscow, M. (2002). *The Index for Inclusion*. Bristol: Centre for Studies in Inclusive Education.

Davis, G. y Thomas, M. (1992). *Escuelas eficaces y profesores eficientes*. Madrid: La Muralla.

Elliott, J. (1990). La investigación acción en educación. Madrid: Morata.

Fullan, M. (2001). *Liderar en una cultura de cambio*. Barcelona: Octaedro.

Gairín, J. (2009). Cambio y mejora. La innovación en el aula, equipo de profesores y centro. En J. Paredes y A. de la Herrán. (Coords): *La práctica de la innovación educativa* (pp. 21-48). Madrid: Síntesis.

Kemmis, S. & Taggart, R. (1992). *Cómo planificar la Investigación-Acción.* Barcelona: Laertes.

Moriña, A.; Gallego, C y Hernández, E. (2010). Desarrollo de proyectos de educación inclusiva a través de la formación en colaboración. En A. Manzanares (Ed). *Organizar y dirigir en la complejidad. Instituciones educativas en evolución* (pp. 291-301). Madrid: Wolters Kluwer.

Parrilla, A. et al (2010). El desarrollo local como marco de una educación más inclusiva. En A. Manzanares (Ed). *Organizar y dirigir en la complejidad. Instituciones educativas en evolución* (pp. 273-281). Madrid: Wolters Kluwer.

Parrilla, A. y Gallego, C. (2001). El modelo colaborativo en educación especial. En F. Salvador Mata (Dir). *Enciclopedia psicopedagógica de necesidades educativas especiales,* Vol. I, 129-165. Málaga: Aljibe.

Ramasut, A. and Reynolds, D. (1997). Developing Effective Whole School. Approaches to Special Educational Needs: From School Effectiveness Theory to School Development Practice. In R. Slee (ed.): *Is There a Desk with my Name On IT*? (pp. 219-240). London: The Falmer Press.