

REFLECTIONS OF THE WORKING GROUP
FIRST REGIONAL SEMINAR
“AN AGENDA OF CHANGES FOR FACING THE CHALLENGES OF INCLUSIVE
EDUCATION IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN”

20-22 June 2006, Caracas, Venezuela

General

The Ministry of Education and Sports and the National Commission on Cooperation with UNESCO of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, jointly with the International Bureau of Education of UNESCO (IBE, Geneva) and the UNESCO Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean (OREALC, Santiago de Chile), convened the First Regional Seminar “An agenda of changes for facing the challenges of inclusive education in Latin America and the Caribbean”, which took place in Caracas from 20 to 22 June 2006.

Representatives and participants of the educational and local communities of Argentina, Bahamas, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Ecuador, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Jamaica, Nicaragua, St. Lucia, St. Kitts and Nevis, Peru, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay and Venezuela, as well as officials of the UNESCO International Bureau of Education (IBE, Geneva) and the UNESCO Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean (OREALC, Santiago de Chile), the Andrés Bello Convention and the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO), expressed the wish to follow up the actions undertaken within the framework of the 54th session of the IBE Council on the theme of Inclusive Education.

Situation analysis

Latin America is the region in the world with the most inequality and its poverty indices deny its inhabitants access to the generation of resources and the benefits of economic growth. The poverty rate is estimated to exceed 40 per cent, and more than half of those affected live in conditions of extreme poverty, aggravating inequalities and social exclusion.

The social conditions experienced by Latin America and the Caribbean, seen in combination with the situation prevailing in their education systems, highlight the need to reassert the right to quality education, and the role of the State’s policy as guide, regulator and guarantor to make this right effective.

Exclusive education takes the form of a lack of access to initial education, high rates of repetition and school dropout that prevent a significant number of girls and boys from completing primary and secondary education, and the abandonment of intermediate education, which affect the poorest and traditionally excluded communities, including native peoples, those of African descent and disabled persons. To this may be added the existing wide social and cultural gaps in opportunities and in the results of learning.

Exclusion is not only generated in society but is also aggravated by the educational process through discriminatory teaching practices and the application of uniformizing models that ignore the differences in learning processes and that discriminate against pupils from social and cultural groups other than those of the dominant group.

General reflections

Achieving social and educational quality among Latin American and Caribbean citizens requires reestablishing a social rule of law and justice, which through the democratization of public services and established institutions will allow the introduction of new public management in the region, that will safeguard the active participation of citizens in the formulation, monitoring and assessment of public policies.

In accordance with the principles agreed by the heads of state and government when they signed the Millennium Declaration, quality education for all is intended to be a factor of development for our countries by maximizing the standards of justice and social equity.

The goal of inclusion is to implement the right to quality education for all, ensuring the full participation and learning of all individuals, with special attention being given to those who for various reasons are placed in situations of vulnerability or at an educational and social disadvantage.

Ensuring that everybody participates and learns means guaranteeing equality of opportunities not only in terms of access but also of the quality of educational processes and in the results of learning, as a means of ensuring universal attendance in and graduation from the educational system. This means offering a range of itineraries and careers, which are equivalent in quality and which enable all individuals to acquire, through different ways, the skills they need to perform in society and to plan their own future.

The central focus of inclusion resides in transforming culture, contents and educational practices in order to respond adequately to the diversity of pupils' educational requirements, which are derived from their social, ethnic, cultural and linguistic origins, their gender and their individual characteristics in terms of abilities, motivations and interests.

Inclusion is an ethical imperative, which demands the commitment of society as a whole and which requires the development of comprehensive, intersectoral policies that can tackle the causes and processes which generate inequality within and outside the educational systems.

Further progress must therefore be made in the democratization of real and better quality training opportunities, placing inclusion at the heart of the drive to recreate policies and programmes of educational change. This implies a degree of institutionalization such as to ensure consistency and sustainability, so that this drive becomes a key aspect and not a peripheral policy or a mere response to the undesired effects of other general policies, which do not sufficiently recognize the differences of background-related and individual requirements.

Lastly, there is a need to move towards policies that focus on promoting change within individuals, especially in teachers insofar as they are the fundamental and irreplaceable originators of educational change.

Proposals for progress in inclusive education

The group considers that further progress needs to be made with regard to:

- Preparing a Plan of Action to establish a reference framework for substantive educational changes in order to move forward in areas of inclusive education in countries of the region in accordance with the Millennium Development Goals and the Dakar Education for All Action Plan.
- Setting up a coordinating group for the purpose of preparing this Plan of Action, to be submitted for the consideration of participants at the International Seminar on Education and Inclusion to be held next October in Caracas.
- Promoting and strengthening the system of South-South cooperation, through the dissemination of educational policies and programmes, training, technical and financial cooperation for countries of the region that require it, and the exchange of research, publications and related topics.
- Requesting the International Bureau of Education to include the theme of “Inclusion and Diversity” on the agenda of the next International Conference on Education to be held in 2008 through the Vice-President for Latin America and the Caribbean of the IBE Council.
- Creating a Regional Inclusive Education Observatory, with the aim of promoting and supporting inclusion initiatives and projects and carrying out assessments and monitoring of the policies implemented by countries in the region.
- Promoting forums of reflection and debate in countries of the region as a means of generating public ideas on inclusion and the importance of diversity.
- UNESCO, through the educational innovation networks of the OREALC and the IBE’s Community of Practice in Curriculum Development, should support the countries of the region in efforts to identify, systematize and disseminate experiences related to equity, inclusion and attention to diversity, with special reference to matters relating to literacy and post-literacy.
- The Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and UNESCO will issue a publication containing the approaches, reflections and main conclusions of the First Regional Seminar on Inclusive Education.

Caracas, 22 June 2006