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BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL: CHALLENGES AND LEVERS TO MAKE AN AT-HAND SCHOOL FOR ALL STUDENTS

Abstract

This paper defends the idea of an inclusive schooling, which, far beyond providing a schooling structure for children with disabilities, aims to transform the mainstream school to enable each student to succeed to the best of his or her ability. The implementation of such a school raises questions about the concepts of accessibility, special educational needs and equity. Several levers are then proposed such as training, collective work and a universal conception of accessibility.

Keywords: accessibility, disability, inclusive school, special educational needs.

1. From Disability to the Schooling of all Students

Inclusive school is very often seen as merely the schooling of disabled children. Yet, the inclusive school project is much more ambitious. The United Kingdom has been one of the first countries to pay attention to differences beyond disability. The Warnock Report (1978) certifies that in terms of education, it is more the specific educative needs that must be taken into consideration than the deficiency. Since then, many works have shown the lack of relevance as for education in the information brought by medical diagnoses. For example, to know that children with Down syndrome (Rondal, 2000) have a deficiency in the syntactic / morphological field is pertinent for a therapeutic or re-educative work, but it does not help to build an efficient pedagogical environment for such children. Moreover, done in this way, the diagnosis hides the individual differences as these differences are as important among children with disability as among those without any disability. For example, there are some people with trisomy or autism who take high studies successfully while others do poorly at school, which does not prevent them from developing other skills.

Three types of needs were identified in Warnock Report (1978) on the one hand, the needs for dispositions to access learning structures; on the other hand, the needs for arrangements in the curricula and, finally, the needs for particular attention to the students with emotional and behavioural difficulties. Consequently, many research studies have urged educational systems to consider this non categorising approach (Keil, Miller & Cobb, 2006) that incites to work according to the needs of the children rather than to categorise them according to their particular needs.

The fact of not categorising avoids the "labeling" of the children whose effects have largely been described by sociology (see, for example Goffman, 1975) and allows quick responses without long, expensive diagnosis processes. For teachers and educational professionals, a non-categorising approach allows also finding solutions for a larger number of children who face difficulties at school for other reasons than a handicap, such as illness, social hardships, or a non-integrated culture in the school requirements. Let us take the following example: many children have difficulties in reading that last long after the

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elementary school. This can be due to dyslexia, to some social or cultural contexts that have not allowed a sufficient development of reading requirements, or to a physical or sensorial deficiency. In all cases, the children's needs are the same: Educative resources to help them complete the learning they have failed.

In an inclusive logic, responding to the needs does not merely consist of solving difficulties; it also, and more importantly, anticipates weaknesses and provides pedagogical actions to help every child learn successfully what is at his reach and have a normal social life. It is a real paradigm shifting that takes us from a selective school to a successful school for all learners (Gardou, 2012). This why the UNESCO (2018) has put the inclusive school within its objectives for sustainable development!

2. Accessibility or Compensation?

Satisfying the children's special needs can, sometimes, be achieved by setting up compensatory devices to help some children have access to education. For example, someone can help a child with a physical disability to reach a classroom. This accompanying person – sometimes referred to as a "human help"- can help a child read a document, carry a school work. Of course, it is not a matter of doing the work instead of the child, but *of compensating* his weakness so that he would be able to attend school and learn like the other children.

To provide compensations is necessary for many children: A human help, a computer, a magnifying glass, Braille books allow them to have access to learning without delay and learn. However, compensation has limits; it does not transform school or other educational places; it simply allows some children reach them. Therefore, making up for the difficulties is not enough: most children with learning difficulties will not succeed unless school is transformed. We know that. The school or educative success of many children is hindered by even the shape of the educational place. It is not only a matter of physical organisation of these places, but of pedagogical choices, of curricular contents, of social organisation that turn out to be excluding for many children coming from social and cultural backgrounds away from school (Charlot, Bautier & Rochex, 1992; Dubet & Duru-Bellat, 2009). Moreover, many children have learning difficulties that make their schooling in the usual school context difficult or even impossible (Rousseau & Belanger, 2004; Thomazet, 2008). This maladjustment causes school dropping, weak learning and social exclusion. To achieve an inclusive school, therefore, requires a school transformation.

An accessible school, then, has ramps and other necessary dispositions for people with moving difficulties, but this is not enough. For example, some children often miss school because of an illness, social difficulties or remoteness. Is it possible to provide digitised courses? Other children have vision difficulties or reading problems. Can we help them use a computer or a telephone to "listen" to the text to which they cannot have access with their eyes? Some children have not been able to acquire the basics that would allow them to evolve in their learning; others need more time, a better environment, special pedagogies. These children already have a place in some schools that have been adapted; now it is a matter of generalising these adaptations.

Well beyond compensation, it is accessibility of school that it is question of when we talk about inclusive school. To make lessons accessible is to put in place the devices, the arrangements, and the necessary resources so that all the children can have access to the lessons. Many resources have been developed in order to help institutions and professionals to evolve their devices and practices towards accessibility (Booth and Ainscow, 2002; Michel 2008). It is clear from these scientific works that the approaches must be comprehensive, involving the responsible (school headmasters, inspectors...), the families, and, of course, the

teachers. The researches highlight the need for the evolution of the social environment (peer support, enabling environment) of the pedagogical practices (universal pedagogy, groups of need) and didactic choices (explicit teaching, adaptation of contents to the needs).

It is clear that the transformation of our systems can be achieved only in the long term as it requires deep restructuring involving different actors. Yet, there are already some answers. Some difficulties are already solved, in theory.

A number of solutions are known, now, and with the help of public finances, associations and organisations, they are financially sustainable. It is particularly a matter of setting up the physical accessibility to the buildings, of providing textbooks in Braille, a computer or a cell phone to "read" documents, a sound amplification system, or a translation into sign languages. Thus, many students with disabilities or with sensory or motor limitations can have access to school. Research has shown that when physical barriers are lifted, these students do better (see, for example, Connors, Curtis, Emerson, & Domitorio, 2014, in the case of visual deficiency). Moreover, once the concerns about the lack of knowledge of these students have passed, teachers in mainstream education are very much in favour of welcoming them as it is shown by a recent study conducted on a large scale in France (Le Laidier, 2018). In other words, the accessibility of educational buildings and the reception of many "different" children who are capable of learning like the others do not really need new research, but a concrete implementation.

Other children have needs that make it difficult for them to attend school as we know it. So the answers are less obvious, namely when it is a question of working on social, educational and didactical accessibility. Very often, these children's needs do not only concern schools. The answers are, therefore, obviously more complex in the sense that the expertise of many people - teachers, health and specialised education professionals, families – is necessary to find solutions. Some children with autism would be able to follow a curriculum close to the ordinary one if some arrangements regarding social and educational accessibility (reception at school, class organisation, and methods of school work presentation etc.) are set up. These adjustments can only be done in consultation among teachers, families, and professionals of autism (see Alin, 2019). In other words, for these students, the skilfulness of teachers who can manage a class must be complemented by the knowhow of other professionals, specialised in specific needs and families, too, so as to find solutions *together* that would fit both their needs and the requirements of our teaching systems (class size, respect of school curricula).

In the remainder of this article, we suggest five challenges to building a more inclusive school. To face these challenges would promote the building of a more inclusive school. To overcome them requires both a conceptual approach of all actors leading to the paradigm shift that we mentioned above and the collective building of practical solutions.

3. Five Challenges to Build an Inclusive School

3.1. First Challenge: Inform and Train

In the field of inclusive school, as elsewhere, good will is not enough. The training is seen as determinative by a large body of research (see, for example, Ebersold, Plaisance & Zander, 2016).

As a first step in the training, it would be useful to suggest a time of information so that each actor of the school – children, families, teachers, non-teaching professionals – would know their rights and their duties towards the students who are "different" and would understand that school is changing and must be open to difference. In the second step, it is

necessary to make these actors change paradigm by developing an inclusive point of view, moving from a normative school concept to a school that adapts to the needs of all children (Thomazet, 2008).

In a second step, beyond the principles, vocational training should support professionals in understanding what is expected from them and integrating these expectations in their practice. This training should allow professionals overcome the difficulties they could encounter in the field, which sometimes, take the form of hard dilemmas such as having to respect the curricula and being attentive to the students' needs. We understand, then, that more than an initial training, it is an accompanying with regular meeting times that the actors need to build, stabilise, and adapt their practices (see, for example, Message & Ainscow, 2015).

Setting up these training courses will probably require the training of trainers as the resources are not always available and the task is huge. Investing in training trainers is a powerful advantage as each trained person can train many persons.

3.2. Second Challenge: Rebuilding Equality on the Basis of Equity

Equality is very often a founding principle of our schools. However, equality, as it is implemented, is above all an equality of treatment, a normative equality (Calvez, 1994; CAWI, 2015). According to this approach, school is considered fair only when it provides the same teaching to all children and when it acts towards everyone in the same way. The logic of inclusive schooling presupposes that each child is different and that an identical treatment to all is a factor, not of equality, but of injustice (Skrtic, 1991). To become inclusive, school must reconsider its concepts of equality by providing each child with what he needs so by being fair. This principle, obviously, applies to children with disabilities: to be fair is to allow a blind child have a way to read otherwise than with the book that other children use (a book in Braille, a computer, a cell phone through which he can listen). This principle also applies to any other child at risk to fail school for any other reason than disability.

3.3. Third Challenge: Getting out of "Activism"

To act for an inclusive school, and to act for the construction of a different school, is a matter that concerns families and committed, active professionals. Yet, international commitments that are transposed in the national laws of most countries over the world should make every professional be concerned with the school transformation. This, of course, presupposes a change of mentality, as well as the replacement of the devices of exceptions (specific finances and sectors devoted to the children with disability) by a right reception in ordinary institutions (schools, high school, university). This project should go, beyond teachers, to all levels of the systems, ministries (of education, as well as of health, society, work...), to inspections, to masters of schools and institutions. This also presupposes that the children who are "different" to be received in the ordinary conditions of the institutions in terms of registration, school trip, exams and competitions. The paradigm shift is present in the transformations expected at school: where historically children used to find difficulties to go to school and to study, now, it is School that is in difficulty to be accessible and to allow all children to go to school and study.

3.4. Fourth Challenge: Making Knowledge Accessible

As seen above, the accessibility of educational institutions is an important step, often a legal obligation, even if it often remains to be concretised. Yet, this is not enough to make school inclusive; the following step, once in the classroom, is to allow every child learns.

Well beyond disability, making the weakest pupils follow is the biggest problem that teachers face. Many children are present in the class but do not feel concerned by the teaching that they do not understand and in front of them, many teachers do not have any project for these pupils. The problem of these teachers, as said above, is a dilemma: how to teach challenged pupils while respecting the programme set for all? (Norwich, 2014; Thomazet, Merini & Gaime, 2014). While the children advance in age, at the end of primary school, then in secondary institutions, this dilemma becomes impossible to solve and the concerned students leave the school that is not made for them (Thomazet, Merini, & Gaime,2014). Here again, a change in the way we think of school is necessary. It is not a matter of opposing the needs of the children and the constraints of the curricula, but, on the contrary, it is a matter of teaching at the level of the children so that they learn and therefore move forward in the programs. Far from being a weakening school, inclusive school is an ambitious school that must allow raising the level of our educational systems by allowing each child to learn to the best of his possibilities. To develop universal educational practices (Bergeron, Rousseau & Leclerc, 2011), to set up differentiated teachings (McLeskey & Waldrom, 1996) is then the fundamental challenge on inclusive school.

3.5. Fifth Challenge: Collaborating

Many children at risk of school failure are in complex situations: they have needs that are not only academic. To take these needs into account requires, in addition to the competence of teachers that of other professionals, in care and social work, particularly. Very often, each professional works in isolation from the others, each one in his specific field. In the context of an inclusive school, could we imagine the collaboration of these professionals with different expertise in ordinary schools? (Merini & Thomazet, 2016). It will be, then, a matter of showing a collective intelligence so as to find collective answers, in an ordinary milieu, but adapted to the most fragile students. To take only one example, schooling a child with behavioural or attention disorder would become realisable in an ordinary class because a psychologist would have worked with the school administration, the teachers and other professionals and would have found with them the best way to organise the classes and structure the pedagogy. To these conditions, schooling in an ordinary milieu is possible and beneficial to the children suffering from the autism spectrum (Poirier and Cappe, 2016) and the set up arrangements will be useful to many other students having the same needs (Thomazet, 2012).

4. Conclusion

It may seem legitimate to question the relevance of an inclusive school. However, there too, we have to reverse our logic. The answer to the question if inclusive school is pertinent is yes. If it does not work, let us find the solutions so that it works, so that it becomes pertinent. The answers, as we have often seen, will be found collectively by constituting partnership that allows a cross expertise between teachers, professional disability specialists, as well as cultural and social differences and, of course, families. In this context, the current staffs present in specialised institutions have their place in the ordinary school as teachers' partners.

Building an inclusive school is not optional; it is a legal and an ethical obligation. The inclusive school also meets a societal need: allow all the young people, whatever their difficulties, disability or fragility to integrate and contribute to our societies.

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